
A Step into The Past

Book 22

Huang Yi

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Chapter 1

History's Mystery

Xiang Shaolong sat cross-legged on the floor, allowing Xiao Yuetan who is kneeling behind him to work on his hair.

This old friend smirked, "I may be proficient in all methods of disguise but the practical application is rather limited. Now that I can put my expertise to good use on you is a rare occasion indeed."

Pausing, he continued, "I have your hair tied up in a different style and dyed several spots white, making you look several years older."

Xiang Shaolong is uncomfortable with it, "Does that mean I cannot wash my hair?"

Xiao Yuetan proudly proclaimed, "My personally crafted dye mixture cannot be washed off easily. But to be safe, we can re-dye from time to time."

He added, "We will reach the waters of Lin Zi in a few days. Your biggest challenge presently is to alter the way you speak. You cannot re-use the speaking manner you used while you were disguised as Dong Horse Fanatic. Let's train you to stutter and foolproof your disguise."

Xiang Shaolong confessed, "I will be lying if I say I am not worried. My biggest fear is my enemies recognizing me from my body build."

Xiao Yuetan burst out laughing, “Qi is originally part of Dongyi Tribe. The tribesmen are taller and have a bigger built than the average person. There may not be many men who are as tall as Shaolong but there is unquestionably a considerable amount. All Shaolong has to do is to act a little hunch-backed and not walk with your head raised and chest puffed. That should prevent people from identifying you through your body build.”

Recalling that the people of Qi are the modern Shandong (China Province) people, famous for their height and build, Xiang Shaolong was relieved.

Xiao Yuetan took a glance at the sky through the cabin window and murmured, “The sky is brightening and we have chatted the entire night but I can only feel myself becoming more and more energized. I haven’t been so happy for a long time. Since Lu Buwei tried to kill us, I...”

Noticing Xiang Shaolong’s solemn expression, he apologized, “I shouldn’t have brought this up. Ai! Thinking about it always gives me insomnia.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded, “The day of Crown Prince Coronation will be the same day Lu Buwei dies a horrible death. This is a fact that nobody can change.”

Xiao Yuetan obviously did not understand the full meaning of his historical prediction. He reminded, “Shaolong must not let your guard down. Lu Buwei has been in power for so long in Qin. He will not give up without a fight and watch passively as his authority dissipates into thin air.”

He softly confided, “On this trip to Qi, I harboured the possibility of assassinating him to avenge Third Princess (Zhao Qian) and myself. Now that Shaolong is here with me, I am confident that we can succeed.”

Xiang Shaolong is in a difficult position, because it is stated clearly in history books that Lu Buwei died in Qin during Xiao Pan’s coronation. Any attempts to kill him in Lin Zi will surely end up in failure.

He naturally cannot divulge this and suggested instead, “We need to plan this in detail but I am not satisfied for him to die just like that. I want to personally destroy all that he has built and accumulated, piece by piece, as if I am cutting flesh from his body bit by bit. Only then will I be able to placate the hatred in my heart.”

Xiao Yuetan nodded, “I can see where you are coming from. Ha! I’m done. Your resemblance to Xiang Shaolong is getting lesser and lesser! Wait till I get a bronze mirror to show you your new look. While there is still some time left, let’s catch up on some sleep.”

Barely asleep for an hour, Xiang Shaolong was awakened by the sound of the door opening. With the little light shining in the cabin just before sunrise, he peeped and saw Yun Niang slipping in. After she has determined Xiao Yuetan’s bed, she snaked into his blankets. What speedily followed were sounds of Xiao Yuetan’s playful protest, which was again quickly replaced by sounds of kissing.

Xiang Shaolong was amused. If not for Xiao Yuetan’s coming, he will be the one Yun Niang is passionately kissing now.

He realized the importance of one's status in society.

When he used to be high ranking and held in importance, coupled with his good looks, he could effortlessly sweep women off their feet and won the hearts of many beauties.

With his current beggarly looks and lowly manager status, his attractiveness to women has largely declined.

Despite sounds of teasing and flirtation coming from the other bed, his mind is as calm as still water. He soon fell into deep slumber, having a good time with his wives and son in faraway Xianyang.

Incredibly, it was Xiao Yuetan who woke him up instead.

It was well into the day. Xiang Shaolong has been getting plenty of rest on this trip so even with just four short hours of rest; he can still start his day without any signs of tiredness. Witnessing Xiao Yuetan's highly invigorated countenance, he was astounded, "I thought you would still be fast asleep."

Xiao Yuetan awkwardly explained, "This woman is really desperate. Fortunately, the more women I make love to, the more revitalized I am. The ship is reaching the pier soon. I will send someone to deliver a secret message to Xianyang (City) Master Tu (Xian). Relax! Master and I communicate in a secret code. Even if the message falls into the wrong hands, the enemy will not be able to understand it."

Climbing out of his warm blankets, Xiang Shaolong cheered, “I have complete trust in your abilities.”

Both men got to work after getting dressed.

Sure enough, the ship docked shortly at the pier. This is Xiang Shaolong’s first time carrying out his duties as the General Manager. Luckily, Feng Fei sent her serving maid Little Ping’er to assist him. Little Ping’er is still dressed as a boy and together; they headed ashore to purchase supplies.

Except for food rations, other items procured included silk cloth and make up ingredients. They were kept busy for more than half a day and finally returned to the ship at sundown.

Throughout the day, Little Ping’er treated Xiang Shaolong in a rude and arrogant manner. Xiang Shaolong is not the least bit upset, as he believes that she is treating him simply as the lowly manager, which he is.

Riding back to the ship on their horses, Little Ping’er who was initially riding ahead slowed down her horse and was now riding beside Xiang Shaolong. She courteously advised, “Mistress (Feng Fei) wants me to remind you that although you have been promoted to Manager, you must not be complacent and watch your own behavior. Don’t follow Zhang Quan or Sa Li’s negative example and ruin the good standing of our Song & Dance Troupe.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted, “Your servant (polite way of saying I) does not comprehend what Sister is referring to.”

Little Ping'er pouted her lips and coldly snorted, "You should know what you did. Someone reported seeing Yun Niang enter your room last night. Mister Tan is a man of integrity, a gentleman. This incident certainly has nothing to do with him. Humph! How dare you deny it after you have hooked up with her."

Xiang Shaolong was speechless.

He could not betray Xiao Yuetan and stain his prestigious reputation in the eyes of Feng Fei. He kept quiet and allowed himself to be his sacrificial lamb.

With a face full of scorn, Little Ping'er ignored him and rode ahead of him once again.

After having his dinner, Xiang Shaolong returned to his cabin. Xiao Yuetan was sitting on his bed, focusing on mixing his dye. He updated, "After spending several hours searching, I finally acquired these ingredients. I am planning to darken your facial skin, making you appear more rough and coarse."

Xiang Shaolong sat down beside him and laughed, "Do you know I just became a scapegoat for you?"

Xiao Yuetan was stunned, "What happened?"

Xiang Shaolong repeated Little Ping'er's accusation word for word.

After a moment's examination, Xiao Yuetan snickered, "That haughty

youngster is plain jealous! Shaolong is really charismatic to cause her such anxiety.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned, “Brother Xiao must be joking!”

Xiao Yuetan articulated, “Shaolong is a wise man and I did not expect you to foolishly fall into her cunning trap. Think about it! The weather is freezing nowadays. Everyone will be fast asleep at 4am in the morning; why would there be anyone around and coincidentally seeing Yun Niang entering our room with his or her own eyes. It must be Yun Niang’s personal maid who discovered her Mistress (Yun Niang) leaving her bedroom and told the pretty tomboy about it. She must have guessed that Yun Niang has come for you and tested your reaction. She has found out the truth except that she nailed the wrong guy.”

Xiang Shaolong lost his tongue.

Xiao Yuetan guffawed, “Except for Feng Fei, what good standing is there in the Song & Dance Troupe? Do you believe Feng Fei doesn’t know about my trysts with Yun Niang? I am a famous playboy after all. That green-eyed monster Ping’er deliberately used Feng Fei’s name to put you down!”

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, “One of these days I am going to give her a taste of her own medicine.”

Xiao Yueten chuckled, “The best medicine is served under the blankets. Use you manhood to conquer her.”

Xiang Shaolong exhaled, "I am not in the mood for relationships right now. But I'll definitely make trouble for her to appease my anger. Moreover, I can tell that she detests me."

Xiao Yuetan disagreed, "She will not approach you with that reminder if she is not concerned about you. You are an expert with women yourself and should know that a woman's heart is irrational. The more they seek to irritate you, the more they adore you."

Xiang Shaolong does not want to continue this discussion. Changing the topic, he queried, "Why didn't I see your companions coming back to the ship?"

Xiao Yuetan answered, "Are you referring to Zongsun Heji and the others? I tricked them into going back to my ship, just in case they start becoming suspicious about our close relationship. To be honest, I used the same trick as Little Ping'er, using Feng Fei's name to scare them away."

Looking at each other, both men burst out laughing at the same time.

Xiao Yuetan carefully hid the freshly grounded dye mixture into his luggage chest and clapped his hands, inviting, "Feng Fei is having a rehearsal tonight and has requested me to give her some pointers. Care to come along?"

Xiang Shaolong lay down in his bed, dismissing, "If I don't see you later tonight, I will know you are in Yun Niang's room."

Xiao Yuetan shook his head smilingly and left.

Music was soon heard playing in the upper decks but Xiang Shaolong was doing some deep reflections instead.

After countless trials and tribulations, he eventually still cannot avoid making a trip to Qi. He wondered if the trip will be beneficial for him or is he heading for another disaster

The Warring States are Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei, Han and Qin. Except for the capitals of Yan and Han, he has stepped foot in the others.

On his return trip to Qin, Xiao Yuetan may well take him through the capital of Han. Thus, he probably has no fate with the capital of Yan.

He recalled Prince Dan from Yan as well as all the Lords from other States that he has met before. The last face he envisioned is the 'pretty face' of Lord Longyang. Unknowingly, he was losing the urge to sleep.

The ship will continue sailing tomorrow morning. He wondered if he would meet this 'traitorous' friend in Lin Zi.

In these war-ridden times, everyone is fighting for the country or Lord he is loyal to. Even he is of no exception.

To a certain extent, Xiang Shaolong is loyal to history. He is charting his life to be as accurate to history as he can.

All these events and circumstances have been lined up by the hands of Fate. Xiang Shaolong is basically executing the will of Fate.

Here comes the golden question!

Without him, will History be the same?

Logically, history will be altered. At least there is no way Xiao Pan can become Qin Shihuang without his intervention.

Without Qin Shihuang, China may never be unified.

Such an ambitious man like Qin Shihuang does not often appear in the history of China.

He strongly disputed the fact that Qin can unite China without Qin Shihuang.

To be fair, he is a time traveller who already knew the future. His judgment may be biased.

A simple change can determine victory or defeat.

If Qin does not possess men of talent like Wang Jian, Li Si and even himself, conquering the other Six States will remain a dream and never a reality.

If this is the case, why wasn't Xiang Shaolong a historical figure?

Thinking about this, he broke out into cold sweat.

When he used to ponder about this issue, it was normally envisaged in a

fleeting moment.

Currently, he has nobody to distract him and he was bored to tears thus he can contemplate more profoundly about this issue.

He did suggest to Xiao Pan to forget everything about himself (Xiang Shaolong) because he was afraid of something even more horrendous.

When it comes to the day when Xiao Pan thought of this on his own without Xiao Shaolong's suggestion, it would mean the end of him (Xiang Shaolong).

At the end of the day, the only obstacle to Xiao Pan's ascension to the throne is his Zhao origin.

The intelligent Lu Buwei knows part of the secret and will only get more suspicious when Xiao Pan totally disregarded him as his father.

Thinking back to the occasion when he did a blood test between Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei, proving to (Qin General) Lu Gong & Company that they are not father and son, it was indeed an earth-shattering feat in the eyes of (Master) Tu Xian. The secret is another loophole for Xiao Pan and has to be protected from Lu Buwei at all costs.

Thinking about it, he shook with fear.

Only Zhu Ji and himself know the location of the family who raised Yingzheng (Zhu Ji's son). If Zhu Ji ever shares this information with Lao Ai, Xiao Pan's life will be critically endangered.

Judging from Xiao Pan's character, he will not allow anyone to challenge his authority.

He may not kill himself (Xiang Shaolong).

But what about Zhu Ji?

Knock! Knock!

Knocking was heard on the cabin door.

Xiang Shaolong sat up in surprise. "Who it it?" he demanded.

Creak!

The door swings open.

A serving maid entered his cabin and joyfully greeted, "Hello Manager Shen! Going to bed already?"

Xiang Shaolong recognised her as courtesan Zhu Xiuzhen's personal maid Little Ning. Just barely yesterday was she trying to chase him out of the ship's hall and now she is all smiling, friendly and sweet. Puzzled, he questioned, "What can I do for Sister Ning?"

With her small mouth curved in a cute smile, Little Ning sat down beside him and smiled, "I am here to seek your forgiveness. Wow! Manager Shen is

really sleeping so early?”

Witnessing her intimate behavior, Xiang Shaolong became wary and officially state, “Doesn’t Sister Ning have to wait on Mistress Zhu Xiuzhen?”

Inching closer, Little Ning flirted, “I am here on Mistress’s orders. Ai! This trip is so lonesome. I wouldn’t mind some company myself.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Why is your Mistress looking for me?”

Little Ning cheekily replied, “Can you please don’t treat me like your enemy? Hee hee! But you look very domineering when you are angry and it is very appealing to me. How I wish I can let you punish me and let you do whatever you want to me.”

Xiang Shaolong is a man after all and could not help but feel aroused. He scrutinized this maid from top to toe.

She is positively below eighteen and her looks are average. Nonetheless, her long lashes, seductive eyes, jutting breasts, slim waist, long legs and her good skin complexion is a big draw for him. He can start to feel some temptation for her.

Just as he was deliberating whether to hug her into in his arms, he also felt that it was an inappropriate gesture and was in a dilemma. Before he can make up his mind, Little Ning revealed, “Unfortunately, it is Mistress who has eyes for you. I can only wait until she is done with you.”

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, he stuttered, “Your Mistress,...”

Little Ning nodded, “You should know which room belongs to Mistress. Tonight after midnight, she will be waiting for you in her room. You just have to push the door to enter. Hee! After the deed is done, you must not forget my effort in bringing the two of you together!”

She slipped out after she finished talking.

Xiang Shaolong sat there like an idiot.

In terms of looks, Zhu Xiuzhen comes in third after Feng Fei and Dong Suzhen within the Song & Dance Troupe. She usually stares at him with such hatred and contempt. In reality, she is masking her affections from him.

This is a one-night stand initiated by her, should he take up her offer?

If Feng Fei hears about it, what would she think of him?

Ever since leaving Xianyang (City), except for a session with Qiuling in Daliang (Capital of Wei), Xiang Shaolong has been leading a celibate and lonely life. With his current cozy environment and his sexual desires re-ignited by the wanton woman Yun Niang, he is intuitively aroused when a dazzling courtesan offers him such an opportunity.

All his sleepiness vanished into thin air.

Needless to say, this eye catching Little Ning must be sharing Zhu Xiuzhen’s

cabin bedroom. If he took up the invitation, he may well end up in a threesome.

He suddenly felt guilty and embarrassed.

Back at home, the Talented Lady Ji and the others are worried sick for him and yet he is here having a good time with other women. How can he face his own conscience if he went ahead with his trysts?

He did not have a choice when he made love to Qiuling but he absolutely has no justification if he wants to make love to Zhu Xiuzhen.

He hardened his resolve and lay down once again onto his bed, covering himself with his blanket.

Xiao Yuetan happened to come back to the room this minute, humming a tune happily.

Xiang Shaolong was piqued, "Why would Yun Niang be willing to release you?"

Xiao Yuetan absentmindedly danced a few steps and responded, "This is one of my beliefs when it comes to taking care of my health. We cannot do without sex but we cannot go overboard with it too. Let me tell you something new. Dong Shuzhen is implying to me that she is open to a relationship with me and hinted that I can also have her 'sister' Zhu Xiuzhen as well. Looks like they have a favour to ask of me."

Hearing this, Xiang Shaolong turned quiet and became disinterested.

It is apparent that Zhu Xiuzhen is a free for all.

Seeing that Xiang Shaolong has something on his mind, Xiao Yuetan pondered for a while before asking, “You having trouble sleeping?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “I was about to fall asleep but I was awakened by someone!”

Xiao Yuetan sat down and probed him for the reason.

After Xiang Shaolong finished telling his story, Xiao Yuetan reflected on it and abruptly exclaimed, “What a close shave! This is definitely a trap!”

Chapter 2

Going Along With the Plan

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback, “Why do you say it’s a trap?”

Xiao Yuetan surmised, “Few individuals are my match when it comes to plotting and trickery. When you told me how you managed to rise to your current position, I already smell a rat and paid extra attention to everyone and everything around me. Not only does Zhang Quan hates you to the core, Dong Shuzen and the courtesans close to her can’t wait to see the last of you. Given such circumstances, Zhu Xiuzhen’s invitation can only be a trap.”

Xiang Shaolong sobered up and cursed his own inattentiveness. He nodded, “I suppose when something sounds too good to be true, it probably is! Fortunately, I had no intention of going anyway.”

Xiao Yuetan was baffled, “Since when did our great Xiang Shaolong become so easy going? As the saying goes - It is hard to fight external battles when the internal battles are not won yet. If we do not use this opportunity to diminish our enemies’ influence, the schemes coming from these women coupled with that bastard will catch you off guard one day. Moreover, you have promised Feng Fei to assist her in resisting the men lusting over her. If you do not counter attack them with some trickery, how are you going to prove yourself to her?”

Xiang Shaolong was awkward, “I am not used to scheming against women

and I always have a soft spot for them. In addition, I have no clue how I can counter this beauty trap.”

Xiao Yuetan beat his own chest with confidence, “Firstly, let me analyze the entire scenario. From my conversation with Yun Niang last night, I found out that Dong Shuzen and Zhang Quan are sleeping partners; and the same goes for Sa Li and Zhu Xiuzhen. They are not genuine lovers but just trading sex for power and vice versa. Now that Sa Li has been dismissed and Zhang Quan demoted, you have indirectly antagonize both Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen. You are in a perilous state right now.”

Hugging his blanket, Xiang Shaolong concluded, “This is Feng Fei making use of me to restructure the Song & Dance Troupe. Otherwise, why should she trust a complete stranger like me?”

Xiao Yuetan agreed, “Feng Fei is a scheming beauty and is even more cunning than a fox. You have become one of her chess pieces. I can sense that she dare not offend Dong Shuzen, otherwise even Zhang Quan will be dismissed along with Sa Li. Ha! What kind of trap is Zhu Xiuzhen laying for you? I don’t think she has the courage to kill you. It is most likely she will malign you for entering her bedroom with an ulterior motive, pressuring Feng Fei to sack you from the troupe.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed, “That sounds like a good deal to me. If I can leave the troupe, you can then engage me as a driver or a manservant. By then, no one will be able to identify me!”

Xiao Yuetan exhaled, “Going over to my side is even more dangerous. Many

of my shipmates have seen your WANTED portrait and someone may recognize you after spending more time with you. That is why I tricked Gongsun Heji and the others back to my ship. Only when I have completed your disguise can you interact more freely with them.”

Xiang Shaolong wondered, “What should we do now?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head, smiling, “Zhu Xiuzhen is only adept at using her body to trap men. Shaolong, are you interested to try out this woman? I guarantee that it will be a memorable session and you will not be disappointed.”

Xiang Shaolong’s excitement is beginning to stir but he quickly suppressed it. He rejected, “I am not used to making love to a woman who has no feelings for me, nor do I want to overpower her in such a manner. If Feng Fei knows about our relationship, she will have a bad impression of me. So this is undoable.”

Xiao Yuetan concurred, “I forgot that you are a true gentleman. Since this is the case, let’s give her a scare and teach this wanton woman a good lesson.”

He continued detailing his plan in soft whispers.

As the river wind blows through the air, Xiang Shaolong snaked out of his cabin through the cabin window. Using his climbing equipment, he hooked up the higher decks and stepped on horizontal planks protruding from the ship’s body. Like a lizard, he shimmied towards Zhu Xiuzhen’s bedroom.

Luckily, the layer of ice formed on the ship's external wall has melted away due to the rise in temperature. Otherwise, it will be a precarious climb even with the hooks and ropes.

There is complete silence on the ship and the shore is equally noiseless. Under such hostile weather, everyone will want to snuggle in their warm bed and blankets.

Every time he passes through a cabin window, he has to stoop down.

He has to travel past ten odd cabins and only a few of the cabins are still illuminated with a faint candlelight. Zhu Xiuzhen's cabin is obviously not one of them.

The three rooms nearest to the ship's front belong to Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, the three most influential courtesans. Yun Niang's room is on the opposing side.

As Xiang Shaolong's room is nearer to the ship's tail, he has to climb a long distance, through several sections of the ship before he can arrive at Zhu Xiuzhen's window.

It is a different world being inside the cabin and outside the ship. Besides the difference in temperature, it also evokes a different kind of feeling.

Xiang Shaolong was humoured.

He resembles a hero from Wuxia (sword-fighting) novels who can scale walls

and jump from roof to roof. The only disparity is that he is not fighting for justice but simply trying to preserve his existence.

Xiao Yuetan's assessment of Feng Fei has made him more wary of this beauty.

As the saying goes - Never trust anyone. He is too gullible and even more so in front of good-looking women. His mind has subconsciously given him the impression that these women are equally beautiful on the inside. A woman's heart is hard to fathom. Right now, Zhu Xiuzhen is a living example.

Xiang Shaolong retrieved his grappling hooks and shot them out again, further and higher. Using the momentum, he repeated this step a few times and finally landed outside Zhu Xiuzhen's window.

The room is so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

He was about to draw out his dagger and pry open the window when he heard intermittent sounds of moaning coming from Dong Shuzhen's window up ahead.

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and curious at the same time. He couldn't help but inched forward to her window and place his ear against the wall.

Who could be in Dong Shuzhen's room?

He was in a state of shock after hearing what followed.

It turns out that the two person making love in the room are both women and he could hear them screaming in ecstasy as they reached their orgasm.

It appears that Dong Shuzhen is bisexual.

He was about to leave when Dong Shuzhen praised in a hoarse voice, “Xiuzhen is really good.”

Xiang Shaolong was astounded. Why is Zhu Xiuzhen in Dong Shuzhen’s room? And who is in Zhu Xiuzhen’s room right now?

Didn’t Yun Niang tell Xiao Yuetan that Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen are hooked up with Zhang Quan and Sa Li respectively? In that case, Dong Shuzhen should be opposing Zhu Xiuzhen instead. Why are they a lesbian couple now?

While he was in a state of confusion, Zhu Xiuzhen panted, “To think that you are still in the mood to tease me. That fellow should be making his way here soon. If we continue making out, we will not be able to hear him entering my room.”

Dong Shuzhen giggled, “All we need to hear is Xinyue’s cries of rape!”

Zhu Xiuzhen pondered, “I only switched rooms with Xinyue tonight. Will this arouse Mistress’s (Feng Fei) suspicions?”

Dong Shuzhen sniggered, “This is the best part of the scheme. Even if Feng Fei suspects us of any misdeeds, she will also see for herself that Shen Liang is just a pervert. He is newly promoted to manager but is already trying to get

fresh with the courtesans. How can he shoulder heavy responsibilities in the future? Besides, she has to bear with us because without us, there is no way she can hope to win Lan Gongyuan and Shi Sufang.”

Zhu Xiuzhen reflected on her words for a while and whispered, “I really cannot understand what a prestigious person like Mister Tan sees in that lowly servant Shen Liang.”

Xiang Shaolong was just about to leave but upon hearing her comment, he continued to eavesdrop.

Dong Shuzhen sighed, “This fellow has certain abilities and his fighting skills alone is heart-stopping. If not for the fact that he is above bribing, I don’t mind letting him take advantage of me.”

Xiang Shaolong doesn’t have an inkling why is Dong Shuzhen coming up with all these schemes. He wished that she will divulge more of her plans but when their silence is interrupted by sounds of light moaning, he lost all interest and returned back to his cabin.

After Xiao Yuetan heard his story, he was greatly amused too. He ran the thoughts over his mind and slapped his thigh, exclaiming, “I have a plan. We can turn their scheme around to attack Zhu Xiuzhen and increase your standing within the Song & Dance Troupe.”

Xiang Shaolong quickly asked him for the details.

Xiao Yuetan whispered, “You can write a letter. Inside the letter, you can

express your gratitude for Zhu Xiuzhen's love but you are unable to accept her affections and ask for her forgiveness at the same time. We will place the letter under the door to Zhu Xiuzhen's original room, now occupied by Xinyue. In this case, we can expose their scam and at the same time, prove that you are a man who can resist such temptations."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed, "This cannot be accomplished. I can fight or lead an army to war but writing a letter is simply beyond me."

Xiao Yuetan was in a daze and laughed, "I did not think of that. Well, I suppose I can write the letter for you but you have to sign it yourself. Just remember not to sign Xiang Shaolong on it."

Solving this difficulty for good, Xiang Shaolong can feel his shoulders lightening and laughed together with Xiao Yuetan.

Early next morning, the ships began sailing, continuing their journey.

After having breakfast in their rooms, Xiao Yuetan joined the courtesans at the ship's front deck, enjoying themselves as they admired the picturesque scenery on both sides of the shore. Xiang Shaolong is kept busy as he learnt the ropes as the troupe manager.

As expected, Little Ping'er was guiding him on the side.

He may be thinking too much but Little Ping'er's attitude towards him seemed to have improved. When they were auditing the new purchases at the basement of the ship, she asked out of the blue, "Why did you take the

rap for someone else?”

Xiang Shaolong was confounded, “What rap are you talking about?”

Her face reddening, Little Ping’er replied, “Last night, I discovered that Yun Niang’s partner is Mister Tan and realized that I have wronged you. Why didn’t you refute my accusations?”

Xiang Shaolong deliberately provoked her, “Didn’t you mention that Mister Tan is an upright and righteous gentleman? Furthermore, Sister Ping’er did not give me a chance to speak out. My conscience is clear and I do not owe you an explanation. So, I guess Sister Ping’er will not despise me anymore?”

Little Ping’er is greatly embarrassed and changed the topic, “You seemed to have aged a bit over the past two days. Even your hair is turning white.”

Xiang Shaolong was panicking inside but acted like nothing is out of the ordinary. He laughed, “There are people whose hair grew white overnight. I am considered to be lucky as I only have a little bit of white hair.”

Little Ping’er knows that he is hinting that he was so worried about her misunderstanding him that his hair turned slightly white. She was surprisingly pleased and shot him a look before resuming an official expression, instructing him on his responsibilities.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing his heart out. Teasing cute babes is one of life’s little happiness.

Oddly, Feng Fei summoned him to join her for lunch. Xinyue was invited as well.

Xiang Shaolong of course knows what this is all about but he feigns innocence.

Feng Fei took this opportunity to ask him about his new duties before going straight to the point, "Does Manager Shen know that he was nearly a victim of a vicious plot?"

Xiang Shaolong acted surprised, "Your servant (polite way of saying I) does not understand Mistress's words."

Opposite him, Xinyue clarified, "At Zhu Xiuzhen's request, I switched rooms with her last night and I became the recipient of your 'love' letter. Does Manager Shen understand now?"

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be angry at being cheated. He cursed, "So she is planning to harm me."

Revealing a gentle expression, Feng Fei praised, "You did not disappoint me. Whoever I hired in the past will eventually succumb to their advances. Manager Shen is the only exception."

Xinyue commented, "I did not expect Manager Shen to have such good writing skills too!"

Xiang Shaolong frankly admitted, "That was written by Mister Tan after I

begged him to help me. Except for being able to sign my own name, the rest of my writing is unintelligible.”

Feng Fei nodded, “You are willing to speak the truth. That is very rare. But Manager Shen is extremely eloquent and knows a wide variety of proverbs. Why are you unable to write a simple letter?”

Xiang Shaolong obviously cannot reveal the truth. He lied, “I have read a few books but did not practice my writing.”

Xinyue was startled, “Manager Shen must be the son of an official. Ordinary folks will not get to read books.”

Xiang Shaolong is facing the ‘identity interrogation’ of his lifetime. During those ancient times, the printing press is not invented yet and every single book is hand copied onto cloth or bamboo. Books are not commonly found and are considered precious items. If not for ancient scholars starting public schools to educate the masses, only the rich and powerful are entitled to learning words and becoming literate.

If the two ladies continued asking about the books he has read before and their authors and such, his lies will be exposed.

He sprouted nonsense, “I came across some books while serving Great General Lian (Po).”

Feng Fei bought his story and assured, “Zhu Xiuzhen’s scheme is a small matter. In the future, even if someone disparages you, I will not believe it.”

Xinyue appears to be quite fond of Xiang Shaolong. She suggested, “When we are rehearsing our routine later, it will be good to have Manager Shen around. It will be good for you to know about our manpower arrangement together with the props we will be using. Can you be there?”

Xiang Shaolong acquiesced.

Feng Fei abruptly let out a sigh, frowning her two delicate eyebrows.

Xiang Shaolong may be used to seeing pretty faces but he cannot deny that she has one of the most elegant eyebrows he has ever seen.

The eyebrows looked like they are personally hand painted by the Creator, crescent-shaped and simply flawless.

Xinyue sighed with her and murmured, “Mistress must be feeling perplexed over that issue again! This trip to Lin Zi, we must not lose to the Three Courtesans Troupe and the Soft Boned beauty.”

Xiang Shaolong has nothing to add.

If they need a swordsman for a duel, he can absolutely do his part. But in this aspect, he is unable to make a contribution.

From Feng Fei’s expression, he can guess that she is having some difficulties over the Song & Dance arrangements.

Being in the creative industry, Feng Fei would certainly want a breakthrough.

This also means challenging her own ways of thinking and doing things, to break her own mold. Needless to say, it is not easy to reinvent yourself.

Feng Fei's expression became slightly downcast and she kept mum.

Xinyue is the one continuing the conversation and specially reminded Xiang Shaolong to come to their rehearsal tonight.

After taking his leave, Xiang Shaolong was about to return to his room and corroborate his story with Xiao Yuetan when someone called out from his back, "Shen Liang!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around. It is the 'matchmaker from hell' coquettish maid Little Ning.

She rushed along the long corridor towards him, speaking in a loud voice, "Why didn't you come over last night? Mistress waited tirelessly for you the entire night."

Xiang Shaolong apologized, "I was waiting in bed but I accidentally fell asleep as I was too tired. I beg your pardon Sister Ning."

Little Ning was infuriated, "You are really incorrigible. Mistress is very upset with you now!"

Xiang Shaolong casually shrugged his shoulders, giving her a helpless look,

stunning Little Ning with his indifference. He turned back and started walking towards the wooden steps linked to the lower deck.

Little Ning caught up to him and pulled his sleeve, admonishing, “You are going to just go off like that? How are you going to redeem yourself?”

To prevent her from harassing him, Xiang Shaolong faced her and directly offered, “The person I like is actually you, Sister Ning. Why don’t you accompany me instead!”

Little Ning apparently knows about making out and glared at him chiding, “Do you want me to be thrown out by Mistress? Ai! Since you are such a nice person, I will try to salvage the situation for you!”

Xiang Shaolong is becoming impatient and coaxed, “Love cannot be forced. Sister Ning need not worry about this. Why don’t you come to my room tonight?”

Seeing that her plan has failed, Little Ning was worried, “How can we use your room? Mister Tan is your roommate.”

Stretching his hand out to pinch her cute face, Xiang Shaolong chuckled, “Mister Tan is a considerate man and will not mind at all.”

Finishing, he walked off, laughing inside his heart.

Back in his room, he shared his story with Xiao Yuetan. Both men found his encounters hilarious.

Xiao Yuetan began to dye his hair and beard. In the middle of the disguise session, someone came to summon Xiao Yuetan at the request of Feng Fei. Both men were shocked and hastily hide the entire disguise apparatus.

Alone, Xiang Shaolong is about to take an afternoon nap. Unexpectedly, Zhang Quan came looking for him. Zhang Quan appear very amicable, the complete opposite of his former self.

After he got seated, Zhang Quan officially stated, “Brother Shen used to serve Prince Wuji. Apparently, you want to make a name and fortune for yourself. I want to make a deal with Brother Shen and see if we can reach an agreement.”

Xiang Shaolong already knew he has an ulterior motive for coming. He plainly requested, “Brother Zhang, please speak your mind!”

Zhang Quan confessed, “I did harbour ill intentions when I first hired Brother Shen as a carriage driver. However, you cannot pin all the blame on me. This is not an easy role to fulfill. You will know what I mean when we arrive at Lin Zi. Those rich men and powerful officials viewed us as lowly servants and we will be in trouble if we let our guard down. After being angry when they failed to gain Mistress’s (Feng Fei) attention, they will vent their frustrations on us. If Brother Shen is willing to work with me, I will definitely take care of you like my own brethren. After all, I have been the troupe manager for the past two years.”

Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. He prompted, “Brother Zhang, please

come straight to the point.”

Zhang Quan’s eyes rotated a few rounds before leaning forward and divulging, “The biggest advantage when working with me is that Brother Shen can enjoy pleasures of the flesh. Except for a few untouchables, I can even get Second Mistress (Dong Shuzen) to sleep with you.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be surprised and chortled, “Brother Zhang must be kidding me.”

Zhang Quan hurriedly swore an oath that he is telling the absolute truth before adding, “As long as Brother Shen is willing to follow my advice, I can reward you with five ingots of gold now. When the mission is accomplished, I will give you another ten ingots.”

Xiang Shaolong is amazed.

Fifteen ingots of gold is not a small sum and can allow anyone to lead a luxurious life for many years. Where did Zhang Quan get his money from?

Thinking about this, he can safely predict that Zhang Quan has been bribed by someone rich, powerful and has evil designs on Feng Fei.

Chapter 03

Ancient Opera

Xiang Shaolong observed Zhang Quan beating around the bush and not going straight to the point . He guessed Zhang Quan is testing his limits before revealing the full picture. He affirmed, “The money is very tempting and I would hate to be Brother Zhang’s enemy. However, Mistress (Feng Fei) and I have an affinity for each other. I will not repay her trust with malice.”

His words are tactfully chosen, making his stand clear that he will not do anything against Feng Fei’s interest.

Zhang Quan cunningly scoffed, “Brother Shen is mistaken! Why would I cause any harm to Mistress (Feng Fei)? For the past few days, I admit that I am upset with her for demoting me. But thinking back, it was my own fault. Thus, I do not have the right to bear any grudges.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious, “What does Brother Zhang expect of me? Whatever I can do, Brother Zhang can do better. There is no need for you to lose those glittering pieces of gold into my pocket!”

Zhang Quan leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and whispered, “Are you aware than Little Ping told somebody she has affections towards yourself?”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “What has this got to do with the deal? Anyway, I don’t believe she will tell anybody she likes me.”

Zhang Quan snickered, “She did not say it out word for word but she often talks about you in front of the others. Based on her personality, it is as clear as day that she has taken a serious liking to you.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head aching.

In the present situation, he cannot allow himself to be entangled in any relationships. Moreover, he is too softhearted when it comes to handling the fairer sex. All these complications will only add to his burdens and he secretly warned himself to resist such temptations. He rejected, “Brother Zhang need not speak any further. Making use of Sister Ping to achieve our goals is beyond me. How about this? I will plead with Mistress (Feng Fei) to promote you back to your original appointment and I will serve as your Assistant Manager. We will all be on good terms once again. Isn’t this better than all the daily infighting?”

Noticing his resolute countenance, Zhang Quan was irked and cursed, “Brother Shen is too naïve. Do you really believe that you are promoted to my ex-position because Mistress (Feng Fei) believes in your abilities? She is only using you as a scapegoat! In fact, she is already in love with a mystery man. After her trip to Lin Zi, she will disappear with him to an undisclosed location, leading a life of seclusion and happiness. According to my estimations, she will pretend to develop feelings for you and use you as a diversion, drawing attention away from the real culprit. You will die a wrongful death.”

Xiang Shaolong was outraged, “Who is that man?”

Zhang Quan groaned, “I will not have come to you if I know who he is. Except for Little Ping’er, nobody knows about Feng Fei’s affairs.”

Xiang Shaolong’s opinion of Feng Fei is becoming less and less favourable.

And it is all because Zhang Quan’s words make perfect sense.

Feng Fei is as wise as an owl. She is unlikely to place all her hopes and safety in his hands and yet she gave him such an impression. She is obviously trying to stir up his heroism, painting herself as a helpless damsel who requires his protection. In actual fact, she could have easily planned her own retreat from Qi.

On the other hand, Zhang Quan has been bribed by someone to destroy her grand plan and detain her for his (the rich person) personal enjoyment. Even if he (rich person) cannot win her love, he will have her body.

Feng Fei is like a limited, top quality gem, which everyone wishes to acquire. Although no one can openly use force to obtain her, there will be countless schemes to achieve the same result.

The circumstances are unbelievable.

He was unlucky enough to be drawn into this turmoil.

Zhang Quan assumed that Xiang Shaolong has changed his mind. He took his money pouch out from his bosom and counted five ingots of gold. He put his

arm around Xiang Shaolong's shoulders and gently persuaded, "My mastermind is a high ranking and influential man in Qi. He is one in a million. Brother Shen only need to do your job well and you may be even rewarded with an official post. He loves Mistress (Feng Fei) whole-heartedly and will give her a good life. At the end of the day, take it that we are doing Mistress a huge favour."

There is no way Xiang Shaolong will trust his words.

But if he puts himself in Zhang Quan's shoes, he will too bluff about have a rich and powerful backer in Qi because it is indeed an effective way to coerce the weak into submitting.

Xiang Shaolong plainly requested, "Let me try to understand the situation more thoroughly before I commit to a decision. Brother Zhang, please keep your gold for the time being. Ai! Regardless I work with you or not, you should give me some time to consider your proposal."

Looking at his unwavering appearance, Zhang Quan nodded, "All right, but you must give me an answer by the time we arrive in Lin Zi."

After Zhang Quan left, Xiang Shaolong is still fixated in his daydream.

Will Feng Fei really use him as a scapegoat for the man of her dreams?

With her refined and lovely facade, it is hard to imagine that she is such a despicable person.

From the beginning, he had assumed Zhang Quan to be Dong Shuzen's lapdog, but it is apparently not true after analyzing his (Zhang Quan) tone.

Dong Shuzen is trying her best to get rid of him, while Zhang Quan is trying his best to bribe him. Their actions are contradictory to each other.

He is getting more and more muddle-headed when Xiao Yuetan returned to the room.

Listening to Xiang Shaolong's exchange with Zhang Quan, Xiao Yuetan frowned, "Never in my wildest imagination did I expect Feng Fei's retirement to cause such a big hoo-ha. It appears to me there is indeed a mastermind trying all means and ways to have Feng Fei all for himself. To a certain extent, Zhang Quan's words sounds logical. Feng Fei enjoys the respect of numerous Kings and Lords. If she takes the trouble to ask for assistance, she will have no lack of capable men coming forward to offer their protection. And yet she has to be so secretive about the whole thing. Thus, I conclude that her mystery lover is someone unique, maybe even someone who has a lowly status. Exposing this person's identity will cause disaster to befall upon him."

Compared to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Yuetan has a better understanding about the mentality of the rich and powerful. He queried, "Is Feng Fei so wicked that she will really use me as her scapegoat?"

Xiao Yuetan grinned, "Let's wait and observe the situation further. I am sure things will be clearer after some surveillance. Our Shaolong is no pushover after all; whoever dares to scheme against us can expect a scheme in return."

Xiang Shaolong agreed.

Who would have thought that such a small Song & Dance Troupe would involve such complications?

Watching the Song & Dance Troupe rehearsal, Xiang Shaolong finally understood how Poetry, Singing and Music can be amalgamated into one body. In the past, either he did not pay much attention to these performances or he only stare at the beautiful main character. In this moment, he can feel himself immersing into the presentation and can fully appreciate every component of it.

By itself, the 30 odd member orchestra led by Yun Niang is show-worthy.

Yun Niang plays a set of 8 hanging bells, representing the 8 ancient and original tones (Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do). Ranging from big bells to small bells, they took up one-fifth of the space in the hall. She strikes the bells in a graceful posture, mesmerizing the audience with her nimble stances and dance steps. It is no wonder why she is highly respected by Feng Fei.

Xiang Shaolong assumed that Yun Niang is aware of Feng Fei's plans to disband the Song & Dance Troupe. Thus, she is using every opportunity to get close to Xiao Yuetan, hoping to marry him after the disbandment. As one grows older, one becomes more practical. If he was in her shoes, he too would choose the 'successful' Xiao Yuetan and not the 'pathetic' Shen Liang.

The hall is full of ancient instruments like the stone clappers, metal cymbals, pipes, lutes, bronze drums, chimes and harps, providing well-matched

melodies. The music is soothing, gentle and pleasing to the ears.

Xinyue, Zhu Xiuzhen and the other courtesans are dancing to the music.

Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen are standing at a side, analyzing the dance. From time to time, they will lean towards each other and exchange feedback. From their body language, it is impossible to tell that they are secretly opposing each other.

The serving maids are tasked to assist the courtesans in changing clothes and serving refreshments. It was a busy and lively scene.

On this occasion, Feng Fei did not invite Xiao Yuetan along. As a result, Xiang Shaolong is sitting at a side, watching the rehearsal all by himself.

Fortunately, he can feast his eyes on the gorgeous courtesans. He kept himself busy checking them out.

On several counts, Xinyue flutter her eyelashes at him, giving him a sense of warmth, making him feel less lonely.

Zhu Xiuzhen appears to be as angry with him as before. She gave him a fierce stare and no longer pays any attention to him.

Out of a sudden, an icy voice sounded out beside him, "Who are you staring at?"

Xiang Shaolong turned in head in astonishment. It is Little Ping'er dressed up

as a boy, looking at him with a hostile expression. He was momentarily shaken before he spluttered out, "I am watching the rehearsal!"

Little Ping'er whined, "I think you are looking at Mistress (Xinyue) instead."

'None of your business', Xiang Shaolong was scolding inside. On the outside, he swallowed his pride and inquired, "Doesn't Sister Ping think the rehearsal is fantastic?"

Little Ping'er stomped her feet, "You are paying so much attention to her and must be lusting for her."

Xiang Shaolong can detect the overpowering jealousy in her words and since he feels no affections for her, he is beginning to feel annoyed. He intentionally rebuffed, "It is common for men to be drawn to attractive women. When Miss Xinyue performs in front of a large audience, is Sister Ping going to scold the few hundred spectators?"

Her face reddening on the spot, Little Ping'er marched away in anger. Xiang Shaolong can instantly feel a burden released from his shoulder. This lass is willful, easily jealous, stubborn and demanding. It is best not to get involved with her.

Feng Fei waved him over and enquired, "What does Manager Shen think about this new routine?"

Dong Shuzen's gaze fell upon his face, scanning him with full attention. Despite knowing that this is a loose woman whom he can easily sleep with,

the fact that he has heard her moaning before, coupled with their close proximity now where he can have a delightful view of her huge breasts and slender waist, Xiang Shaolong is transfixed. He dryly coughed, "I am inexperienced when it comes to music but I must say that the melodies are a treat to my ears. Yun Niang's playing of the bells is clear and precise, akin to a Commanding General leading his huge army to war."

Dong Shuzen said, "Manager Shen is too modest. Your simple words have explained the essence of the orchestra. The ringing of the bells has all along been essential to managing the timing as well as the sound effects of the orchestra. The bells marked both the starting and ending of every song, and can be played as a solo or as an accompanying instrument to the zither, lute, pipe or flute. The bells are the most versatile and they affect the mood of the song."

Facing her enticements, Xiang Shaolong knows that she is faking them but is nonetheless surprised by her enlightenment. He pretended to listen intensively to her words.

Taking in the intoxicating fragrances of the two ladies, Xiang Shaolong visualize himself as the only male species in a country of women. Sailing up the long river on this giant ancient ship in winter, he felt like he is on top of the world.

In a remarkably tender voice, Feng Fei shared, "Content arises from poems, movements arise from dancing, sounds arise from singing. When these three become one body, it will become a special birthday present for the King of Qi. It is named - The Immortal Phoenix Arising. Unfortunately, I encountered

some difficulties in the main song. Hopefully, I can resolve it by the time of the banquet. Otherwise, it will be a huge disappointment.”

A strange look flashed by Dong Shuzen’s face. Although curious, Xiang Shaolong cannot guess what is on her mind.

Xiang Shaolong turned his attention to Xinyue and the dancing courtesans. He casually asked, “Is there a different dance movement for every song, portraying a different setting? And lastly, will the main song come in to bring the audiences to a climax, bringing closure to the story?”

The curvy bodies Feng Fei and Dong Shuzen uncontrollably trembled. Their pretty almond-shaped eyes looked at each other in wonder for some time before they both stared at him.

Xiang Shaolong can sense that something is not right. Witnessing their amazement, he awkwardly apologized, “Your servant (polite way of saying I) is spouting nonsense. Both Mistresses, kindly do not take offence.”

The two ladies remained silent.

Now it was Xiang Shaolong’s turn to shudder. He found out the reason for their reaction.

To a 21st century person, it is common to express a story through a musical. There is nothing new or surprising.

However, during the period of the Warring States, music is traditionally

linked to its origin - used as part of prayers to the Creator. Music itself has no 'storyline' until the later dynasties of Song and Yuan.

In the eyes of Feng Fei, his words are a groundbreaking revelation.

Her alluring breasts still quivering, Feng Fei finally exhaled, "Ai! Shen Liang, this is a very novel perspective of things. You are indeed a very special person."

Dong Shuzen quipped, "This idea is not only unique but superbly refreshing. Mistress should consider it."

Feng Fei's pair of glimmering, soul-hooking eyes rested on Xiang Shaolong's face for some time before she decided, "Shuzen, please give some thought to it as well. I am going back to my room to take a rest."

Finishing, she took her leave without giving Xiang Shaolong a second glance. Dong Shuzen came closer to Xiang Shaolong until her pert bosom nearly came in contact with his hand. She revealed, "No one has ever cause Feng Fei such agitation. Shen Liang, you are the first."

Embarrassed, Xiang Shaolong uttered, "Second Mistress must be making fun of me."

Her lovely face blossoming like a flower, Dong Shuzen tiptoed and whispered into his ears, "My heart beats for you too." Finishing, she even lightly blew a mouthful of air into his ears.

Xiang Shaolong is fully aware that she is trying to seduce himself to achieve her dark, unspoken goal. Nonetheless, he felt like touching her in return. Hurriedly suppressing his temptation, he rejected, "Second Mistress, please don't. It doesn't sound right."

Dong Shuzen gave him a coquettish smile and shifted slightly away. She batted her eyes at him, "You can come to my room whenever you are free. There will just be the two of us and we can enjoy each other's company in full privacy."

Xiang Shaolong thought: Wouldn't that be sending the lamb into the tiger's den? Getting himself ensnared in her beauty trap?

He answered, "Your servant dare not. Mistress (Feng Fei) will be offended."

Dong Shuzen sweetly smiled, "Your fists are so hard and yet your guts are so little. Mistress (Feng Fei) will not bother with my business. Oh! Unless you are pining for Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned, "Second Mistress must be joking. Your servant is just a lowly manager. I dare not dream of being the toad lusting after the swan's flesh."

Dong Shuzen's body wobbled, "Toad lusting after the swan's flesh. How in the world did you think of such proverbs?"

Xiang Shaolong realized that this proverb is not invented yet. He uneasily responded, "It is just me spouting gibberish as usual."

Dong Shuzen took a closer look at him as if this is the first time she is seeing him. After some time, she questioned, “Every time you say something, you will disclose some thought-provoking ideas. You are such a talent and it is a pity if you are under-utilized. Shen Liang, have you ever thought about your plans for the future?”

Right now, the music has stopped playing. The courtesans are giggling among themselves, awaiting further instructions from Dong Shuzen.

Only Xinyue is alone at a side, jealously eyeing the intimate conversations between the two of them.

Little Ping’er is nowhere to be seen.

Xiang Shaolong professed, “I am completely satisfied with my position now as General Manager. Ah! They (the courtesans) are waiting for Second Mistress’s guidance.”

Dong Shuzen divulged, “Let me tell you a secret. The Song & Dance Troupe will disband soon. Everyone who knows about it has been keeping a lookout for other prospects. For myself, I am greatly troubled, as I do not wish to end up as someone’s concubine or mistress. Shen Liang, if you have any plans, please come and talk to me about them.”

She stretched out her hand, pinching his arm and softly beamed, “You are really muscular.”

She then smilingly went over to the courtesans.

Xiang Shaolong dared not look at Xinyue's expression and quickly slipped away.

On his way back to his cabin, this is the first time he sympathizes with Dong Shuzen.

She has dedicated her entire life to singing and dancing. She obviously does not wish to lose her career as such a young age. Moreover, it is the only admirable career a woman can have in this ancient period.

To a certain extent, Feng Fei is awfully selfish and only makes plans for herself. It will be even more unforgivable if Feng Fei is using him as a scapegoat, a diversion, as propagated by Zhang Quan.

If there is a way to allow Dong Shuzen to become Feng Fei's successor, giving Feng Fei a hassle-free retirement, that will be a happy ending for both parties. It is a difficult proposition, though not entirely impossible. The issue lies with Feng Fei.

Back in his room, Xiao Yuetan has just completed his new dye and is working on Xiang Shaolong's disguise. When Xiang Shaolong told him about Little Ping'er noticing the changes in his (Xiang Shaolong) appearance, the latter laughed, "I guarantee that nobody can see through your disguise once my work is completed. Our biggest advantage is your weight loss, causing the shape of your eyes to be different from before. You must watch your diet and don't gain too much weight."

Xiang Shaolong groaned, "I have been restricting myself already. Now that Little Ping has expressed interest in me and Dong Shuzen is trying her best to seduce me, I can feel my head aching. What should I do?"

Xiao Yuetan jested, "Xiang Shaolong is Xiang Shaolong. Even Talented Lady Ji has fallen for you; it is no surprise that other girls will do the same. Hey! Let me show you something."

Xiang Shaolong shifted his gaze to the object on his open palm. It resembles a fruit seed, extremely hard and about the size of a thumb. Piqued, he questioned, "What is it?"

Xiao Yuetan rationalized, "It does not matter what it is. What it is used for is more critical. When you put it under your tongue, it will change the tone of your voice, making you sound vastly different from Xiang Shaolong."

Xiang Shaolong frowned, "But if Feng Fei and the others hear my new voice, wouldn't it raise any red flags?"

Xiao Yuetan assured, "Your status is not the same as before. When Feng Fei is speaking to outsiders, do you think you have the right to be present? And even if you happen to be around, you do not have the right to interrupt or give your opinion. When you are meeting with someone familiar, all you have to do is to pop this into your mouth and evade identification."

After experiencing Xiao Yuetan's bag of tricks, Xiang Shaolong is no longer surprised by the ridiculous stuff he comes up with. He picked up the seed and

placed it under his tongue as instructed by Xiao Yuetan. With further supervision by the Master of Disguise, he is re-learning how to talk as if he is a toddler. True enough, the tone of his voice is now very different from before.

As Xiao Yuetan is laughing at Xiang Shaolong's antics, the sound of knocking is heard. He swiftly went to open the door.

Xiang Shaolong saw Xiao Yuetan being yanked out of the room and was in a state of perplexity when Xiao Yuetan reentered the room and whispered, "I am going over to Yun Niang's room tonight to have a good time. If you are feeling lonely, try approaching Xinyue or one of the ladies. I have not tried Xinyue before but I personally guarantee that Dong Shuzen will give you a night to remember. All the best." When the cabin door was closed again, Xiang Shaolong can only smile bitterly to himself.

The voyage is a lonesome one and a female companion for the night will surely grant him significant happiness. However, he cannot go against his own conscience. After being in a daze for some time, he made peace with his own emotions and snuggled into his bed and blanket. Since he left Qin, his greatest joy lies in meeting his wives and son in his dreams. Just as he was about to fall asleep, his ears picked up the sound of the door softly opening and he woke up in shock.

Xiang Shaolong reached over and barely grasped the handle of Bloodwave hanging by his bedside when he was overwhelmed by a womanly fragrance. A sizzling hot female body has snaked underneath his blanket, entangling him securely like an octopus.

Chapter 04

Knee Deep in Trouble

As Xiang Shaolong is well rested, his mind is especially alert and his five senses are exceedingly delicate. Facing the probability that this lady in front of him can be Dong Shuzen, Xinyue, Zhu Xiuzhen or even the unlikely Little Ping'er, he is excited beyond words.

After expending a tremendous amount of willpower, he managed to evade her lips and whispered into her ears, "Who are you?"

The mysterious lady cooed, "Do you have many women who come to you like this?"

Xiang Shaolong cannot recognize her faked voice and laughed, "It is the exact opposite! If another woman had come to me in such a manner, I would have mistaken you for her! Why would I bother to ask about your identity?"

The lady held tightly to his waist and buried her face into his chest, purring, "It is also possible that you have many ladies coming to you and you could not tell them apart."

Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure that this lady cannot be Little Ping'er or Xinyue as Little Ping'er is still angry with him and Xinyue should know that he values his chastity and is not easily tempted.

Groping her, Xiang Shaolong countered, "If this is the case, I should be able to tell who you are by feeling you and need not question you further."

The lady murmured to herself and appeared to be moved by his words.

Xiang Shaolong cannot hold back his inhibitions any longer. He flipped over, hugging and pressing her down tightly. Concurrently, he reached for a fire stick at his bedside table.

The lady gave a shrill cry, pulling his hand back, exclaiming, "Are you trying to embarrass me? This is the worst time to put the lights on. Let's begin!"

All Xiang Shaolong needed was some starlight to see her features but it was a cloudy night and on top of that, both of them are still covered by the blanket. Xiang Shaolong is as good as blind.

On the other hand, it is this kind of ignorance that caused him to be greatly aroused.

The lady should be one of the three ladies: Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen or Little Ning'er. Every one of them is good-looking, voluptuous and can mesmerize a man with a look or a smile. He is immensely ecstatic and cannot resist this physical invasion.

If not for the layers of clothes between them, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can hold his ground until now.

At the back of his mind, Xiang Shaolong gingerly felt that if he conquered the

lady now, he would be no different from a common pervert. Indirectly, he has lost his self-control and surrendered himself to a strange intruder.

Which is why despite the lady's caressing, the strong lure of enticement and even with an erection, Xiang Shaolong persisted in suppressing the raging flames of passion. Pushing his upper body slightly away, he purposely lied, "I know who you are!"

Below his body, the lady trembled slightly and responded, "So, who am I?"

Based on her shocked reaction, Xiang Shaolong can tell that the lady did not expect Xiang Shaolong to correctly guess her identity.

This meant that she couldn't be Dong Shuzen or Zhu Xiuzhen as these two courtesans have tried to seduce him and have hinted him to bed them. The two of them will not react in such a manner.

Out of the blue, he was hit by an outrageous revelation. Xiang Shaolong stuttered, "First Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

The lady calmed down and soothingly coaxed, "It is Feng Fei indeed. Don't you have feelings for me?"

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart bleeding and all his passions dissipated. He realized that Zhang Quan is right after all. If she did not plan to use him as a scapegoat, why would she lower herself to his level and offer her body to him?

Only with this sacrifice can she convince him that he is her lover.

All along, Xiang Shaolong has had the highest regards for Feng Fei. Right now, his impression of her has been largely tarnished.

Xiang Shaolong coldly hissed, “Why is First Mistress (Feng Fei) doing this?”

In a pleading tone, the lady lightly implored, “Can you please don’t interrogate me like this? Come and give me your love.”

Xiang Shaolong heaved with relief, calming down, “So it is not First Mistress but Sister Ping.”

If she did not use her normal tone and voice, he may have to continue making wild guesses.

Little Ping’er has resumed her normal speaking manner. She gave a soft shrill and her lips advance once again, kissing him fervently.

Absent-mindedly satisfying her lips with his kissing expertise, Xiang Shaolong is furiously thinking about the entire situation.

Logically, Little Ping’er will be accompanying Feng Fei wherever she goes. In other words, unlike Xinyue and her fellow courtesans, she need not worry about her future when the Troupe disbands.

Right now, she has cast aside her self-respect and offered herself unconditionally to him. Though it could be partly due to true love, she may

have been here on Feng Fei's orders, sacrificing herself to control and manipulate himself (Xiang Shaolong).

This belief is not without reason. Although he hasn't grasp Feng Fei's retirement conspiracy or how he will be tricked into becoming a scapegoat, Xiang Shaolong is absolutely sure of one thing - Feng Fei has been lying to him all along.

It does not make any sense for Feng Fei to bet all her hopes and dreams on a stranger like him.

POK!

The fire stick has lighted the oil lamp.

Little Ping'er protested, "Uhm... Uhm..." Unable to take the sudden brightness, her shining eyes are half closed for a while before she opened them fully.

Xiang Shaolong raised his upper body once again and scrutinized this lady in front of him. Her hair is open like a fan over the pillow and he was amazed at her pristine appearance, easily matching Dong Shuzen in terms of beauty. Her attractiveness has been camouflaged by her dressing up as a boy and not applying any make up.

They were looking into each other's eyes.

Contentment and nervousness is written over Little Ping'er's face. The

swirling passion in her eyes is something that Xiang Shaolong cannot fathom.

Xiang Shaolong sighed inwardly. His suspicions have been confirmed.

Lowering his head and kissing her red lips, he gently soothed: "Is this the first time you are kissing a man?"

Little Ping'er nodded in reply.

Xiang Shaolong gritted his teeth, strengthening his resolve against the teasing and caressing. He icily questioned, "Are you here on First Mistress's orders?"

Her eyes wide open, Little Ping'er was taken aback. After a while did she give a flustered reply, "Why do you say so?"

From her reaction, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew that his guess is not far from the truth.

If she had come on her own accord and hearing this question, she would be seriously offended - she would either leave the room infuriated or face him with a wronged expression.

Her reaction only serves to betray her guilt, leading her to deny him an answer, hoping to preserve this secret.

For the past few years, Xiang Shaolong has been debating complicated issues in court. A young girl like her is far from his match.

Xiang Shaolong kept his silence and glared frostily at her.

A clear drop of tear appeared at the corner of her eye, running down her face, staining the pillow.

Little Ping'er turned her face to the side, avoiding his emotionless stare. Breaking down, she began sobbing incessantly and wailed with sorrow, "You don't like me?"

Xiang Shaolong laid down beside her, using his sleeve to dry her tears. He plainly state, "I should have known it is Sister Ping. If it were somebody else, they would have stripped naked before joining me in bed."

Little Ping'er has stopped crying and helplessly submitted, "You are truly formidable. I surrender. Happy?"

Xiang Shaolong's heart softened.

Has he been too ruthless with her?

He actually resorted to such means to deal with an innocent and naïve teenager. Moreover, she is only acting out the orders of her Mistress.

To pacify her turbulent emotions, Xiang Shaolong comforted, "You are a very good-looking lady. Why are you always dressed up as a boy?"

Little Ping'er pitifully confessed, "If I had dressed up like this all the time, the lady in your arms (I) will no longer be a virgin."

Xiang Shaolong can appreciate the hidden grief in her words. Sighing to himself, he continued, "Was your nasty behavior an act as well?"

Little Ping'er began to smile. Her eyes brimming, she revealed, "At the beginning, it was an act but eventually I got used to it. Ai! You reminded me of somebody."

Xiang Shaolong became slightly jealous and asked, "Is it your lover?"

Little Ping'er's mood took a dip. She dismissed, "You are thinking too much! I have only seen him once and his words are very direct and penetrating, exactly like you. His eyes looked as if they can see into your soul. Mistress (Feng Fei) has a deep impression of him too!"

It is Xiang Shaolong's turn to be taken aback. Knowing that she is referring to himself, he dared not probe further.

Little Ping'er professed, "I feel so comfortable being cuddled by you. So that is how it feels like between men and women. No wonder Yun Niang came looking for Mister Tan."

Xiang Shaolong mused, "Sister Ping, how young are you?"

Little Ping'er bashfully answered, "I just turned seventeen! I have been dedicating my life to Mistress (Feng Fei) since I was fifteen."

Keeping up the pressure, Xiang Shaolong interrogated, "Why did Mistress ask

you to do this?”

Distressed, Little Ping'er howled, “Can you stop forcing me? I am in a dilemma. Ai! What should I do?”

Xiang Shaolong supported her up to a sitting position. Putting his lips to her ears, he decided, “What should you do? Honestly tell Mistress everything that has happened and that I have seen through her scheme and quitting this damned manager position.”

Finishing his last sentence, he can feel a large burden being lifted off his shoulders. This job is not well suited for a man like him and additionally, the risk of exposure is too high.

Little Ping'er was frightened, “I can't do this.”

Xiang Shaolong gently caressed her alluring back and smooth neck, smiling, “Just follow my instructions exactly. You need not bother about the consequences.”

Little Ping'er appears to be engrossed in his massage and dreamily asked, “How did you guess Mistress ordered me to come here?”

Xiang Shaolong candidly responded, “Because it is unlike you to do so.”

Little Ping'er seemed to have transformed into a different person. She unwillingly balked, “But I do have some feelings for you.”

Xiang Shaolong is not amused, “It is ONLY some feelings! Come. Be a good girl and go back to your room. I do not wish to have you under such circumstances.”

Little Ping’er went ‘humph’ and enveloped herself into his bosom. She seductively cooed, “Mistress is correct. You are one of a kind and different from other men.”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with earthly desires and can feel himself aroused once more. He was petrified and reminded himself to watch his inhibitions; otherwise, he would lose this golden opportunity to quit his job. He half-forcefully carried her in his arms, sending her to his door.

Little Ping’er turned courageous and hugged his neck with both arms, kissing him zealously.

After a brief struggle, Little Ping’er grudgingly gave him a heart-breaking look and left reluctantly.

Xiang Shaolong locked his cabin door and prevented himself from thinking any further. He soon fell into a deep sleep.

At daybreak, Xiao Yuetan came back to the room a completely satisfied man. After hearing his womanly encounter last night, he was astounded at Little Ping’er’s behavior. He nodded: “It is a wise decision to leave Feng Fei’s employment. Sometimes, less is more. At the end of the day, I still do not understand why she is resorting to such a scheme. Ai!”

Noticing his pale expression, Xiang Shaolong was traumatized, "What is it?"

Xiao Yuetan stammered, "Yun Niang came looking for me last night. Was she acting on Feng Fei's instructions too? Otherwise, why would Little Ping'er know about me going over to Yun Niang's room?"

Xiang Shaolong exhaled a breath of air, "Can you give your little brother (me) a break? I am as tense as a tightrope. Even if this is true, it is nothing surprising."

Xiao Yuetan did not know whether to laugh or cry. He explained, "If this is the case, Yun Niang's words become unreliable. All the information that she has given to me could be lies."

Looking outside the window, Xiang Shaolong swore, "Who cares if they are true or false. No matter what, I am quitting."

Knock Knock!

Xiao Yuetan demanded, "Who is it?"

Little Ping'er voice sounded out from the other side of the door, "Good Morning Mister Tan. Mistress (Feng Fei) is asking to see Manager Shen."

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan exchanged looks before he pushed the door open.

Little Ping'er avoided his gaze and led the way towards a long corridor.

She has resumed her disguise as a boy and has a poker face, behaving as if nothing happened last night.

Initially, Xiang Shaolong was thinking of teasing her but eventually resisted the idea, knowing that this would lead to more troubles.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is stepping into Feng Fei's bedroom on board the ship. Her bedroom is twice as big as his own and divided into two sections. A curtain separates the two sections and one of the section is furnished like a living room.

Of course Feng Fei will not be waiting for him in bed. Right this moment, she is lying on her side on an animal skin covered long bench, with her upper body resting on a cushion. Her hair is slightly untidy as if she had just woken up and her complexion is pinkish, making her appear exceptionally desirable. When he first saw her, Xiang Shaolong was momentarily stunned before he finally paid his respects.

No wonder the saying goes: A beautiful woman can cause a country's downfall.

For someone as charming as her, the rich and powerful will go to extreme lengths to possess her for their own enjoyment. After all, during these ancient times, it is common for influential men to acquire a harem of concubines.

Little Ping'er closed the door and took her leave.

With a peaceful expression on her face, Feng Fei pointed to a chair beside her and invited, "Please have a seat!"

Noticing the absence of any hostility on her face, Xiang Shaolong was feeling confounded and took his seat. His nose was instantly filled with the wonderful fragrances emanating from her body.

Feng Fei beamed, "Little Ping'er is definitely not your match. Otherwise, why would she be tricked by a few simple lies from you?"

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to be so brutally honest and straightforward. He fumbled and dryly coughed twice, "Can I speak my mind?"

Feng Fei plainly state, "If you want to tell me you are quitting, you can save it!"

Xiang Shaolong could not think of anything to say to that. Confused, he vexed: "What is the point of Miss (Feng Fei) keeping me around?"

Feng Fei's eyes turned to him, "Zhang Quan came to see you yesterday; is he trying to bribe you?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly sighed, "Without my answer, you should know what he is trying to achieve. I do not understand why you allowed him to stay on when you can sack him along with Sa Li. Wouldn't things be much better without all these obstacles?"

With her shining eyes, Feng Fei gave him a smile. In a gentle voice, she dissected, “Let us settle these issues one by one. Presently, I have only two wishes. Do you want to know what they are?”

Calming down, Xiang Shaolong snapped in a deep voice, “If this is Miss’s secret, you can save it!”

Feng Fei does not mind his outburst and gingerly smiled, “You are not only a unique person but an extremely strange one as well. Of all the people I have met, there are those gentlemen who do not hanker after fame or fortune. They can choose to think highly of themselves because they are born with a silver spoon in their mouths and live their lives in abundance, without worrying about food or clothing. But you are just a poorly paid carriage driver and yet you behaved like you cannot be bothered and you don’t mind starving to death. Shen Liang, why don’t you tell what this is all about?”

Xiang Shaolong is secretly alarmed, knowing that his anxiety to quit has exposed a loophole, drawing the suspicions of this cunning beauty. He hastily salvaged, “Ai! This is just who I am. I will not bow down to power nor follow orders blindly like a fool. Ha! Worse to worse, I’ll just starve to death. There is nothing to hold me back.”

Feng Fei scrutinized him for quite some time and seemed to have made some conclusion by observing his body language. She finally insisted, “Just by looking at your sitting posture, I can tell that you are not used to working for other people. Why don’t you openly tell me who you really are?”

Xiang Shaolong's heart is beating frantically, guessing that she may have seen through his masquerade and knowing that he is Xiang Shaolong but is unable to verify it. The primary reason lies in Zhang Quan hiring him from the Official Stables of Wei. This is irrefutable evidence of his identity as Shen Liang.

At present, he knows he cannot show any signs of hesitation. He frowned, "Your servant (I) has already told Mistress about my background. To be honest, I am thinking of resigning because I fear that my life will be in danger. At the beginning, I thought Mistress would be supporting me indirectly. Only last night did I realize that Mistress is made from the same mold as the other people trying to get me into trouble. Why should I still trust you?"

Feng Fei is displeased, "Who said that I am scheming against you? You have fulfilled my first wish, allowing me to compose a (Song & Dance) routine that can crush my two major opponents. Therefore, I instructed Little Ping'er to accompany you for a night, relieving your sense of loneliness. At the same time, I am worried that you may eventually succumb to Dong Shuzhen's seduction and switched loyalty to her camp. You have misunderstood my intentions."

Xiang Shaolong is afraid that he will reveal more clues about his real identity if they continue debating like that. He dared not protest any further and acknowledged, "So it is all a misunderstanding!"

Feng Fei lightly highlighted, "Of course it is a misunderstanding. Moreover, I will never force Little Ping'er to do something against her wishes. I am hoping to find a good husband for her in the process."

Xiang Shaolong recalled his lowly status and can only keep quiet.

Feng Fei simply declared, "As long as you escort me out of Lin Zi safely, I can guarantee you a generous payout and even marry Little Ping'er to you."

Xiang Shaolong was mystified, "Don't you require her services in the future?"

A hint of sadness flashed past her lovely eyes as Feng Fei lamented, "Who would want to remain a lowly servant for her entire life? Ai! You seemed to be uninterested in Little Ping'er. I really don't know what is going on in your head."

Xiang Shaolong clarified, "Sister Ping is such an attractive lady; anyone would be glad to marry her. However, my career is more important to me and having a family will only be a liability to me. I hope Mistress can understand my position."

Feng Fei gave him a look and grieved, "Another fool who does not recognize the brutalities of war. How about this? After accomplishing our mission, I will write you a letter of recommendation that will allow you to find work wherever you go. Regarding your future success, it will have to depend on your character and abilities."

There is nothing Xiang Shaolong can add to her words. Pretending to be full of gratitude, he took his leave.

On his way out, he unexpectedly thought of a great idea. He recollected Xiao Yuetan faking his own death to escape from Lu Buwei. Who knows, maybe

Xiao Yuetan can create a similar potion as seen in 'Romeo and Juliet'. It is the potion Juliet consumed to fake her own death, allowing her to escape from her family.

Pondering about this, he can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel and can feel his steps becoming lighter and lighter.

Chapter 05

Staying Against His Will

He had barely taken two steps when further up the corridor, a cabin door opened with a ‘Yeeank’ sound. In a graceful, dance-like disposition, Zhu Xiuzhen sashayed out and blocked his path. Her eyes glared at him with annoyance but yet she pleaded, “Is Manager Shen available?”

Xiang Shaolong is not that dumb to take her appearance at face value. The reason is that all these courtesans are well-trained actresses.

Although Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen did scheme against him in the past, he did not bear the slightest hatred against them now that he is more informed about the present circumstances. On the contrary, his sympathies lie with them.

At the end of the day, they are simply fighting for survival in this male dominated society. Though their methods are overbearing, they are left with no other choice.

Most unfortunately, he himself is the number one wanted man by the Eastern States. His own survival is at stake and he could not assist them even if he wanted to.

His main priority right now is to slip away and not get further involved in this problematic turmoil.

Before he can offer an answer, Zhu Xiuzhen is already pulling his sleeve, dragging him into her bedroom.

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong realized that he is the critical factor in this Song & Dance Troupe internal struggle, the showdown between Team Feng Fei and Team Dong Shuzhen.

Regardless of whether it is Feng Fei's retirement or Dong Shuzhen usurping Feng Fei's position, both ladies will have to collaborate with him and his 'men'.

In addition, he is their bridge to the outside world.

His present role resembles a manager of an international Superstar in the 21st century or, more accurately, the manager of a girl band.

Without his cooperation, Feng Fei and Dong Shuzhen are like toothless, clawless tigresses, unable to achieve anything on their own. This explains why in the past, Zhang Quan and Sa Li are able to sleep with Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen.

Unexpectedly, Feng Fei has made use of Zhang Quan and Sa Li's infighting to destroy Dong Shuzhen and Zhu Xiuzhen's backers, preventing them from gaining the upper hand. She then bestowed this key appointment onto him, Xiang Shaolong.

He finally understood why did Feng Fei allow Zhang Quan to continue serving

in the Troup. In fact, it is a very strategic and advantageous decision.

Due to the intimate relationship between Zhang Quan and Dong Shuzen, it is very challenging for Dong Shuzen to openly seduce Xiang Shaolong. The only way out is for the two of them to work together to chase Xiang Shaolong away but that will only force Xiang Shaolong to look for Feng Fei herself for support.

If Dong Shuzen disregards Zhang Quan, the latter may submit to Feng Fei, betraying all her plans and secrets to Feng Fei.

Sa Li is Zhu Xiuzhen's backer and with him gone, she is now alone and defenceless. She has now chosen to side with Dong Shuzen and has become her pawn. However, once she finds another backer, it is possible that she will fight with Dong Shuzen once again over the succession plans of the Song & Dance Troupe.

On the side, Feng Fei, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen may be oblivious to the knowledge that Zhang Quan has been bribed by an external party and is harbouring evil intentions.

Presently, Feng Fei has failed to bribe him with Little Ping'er, Dong Shuzen has failed in her beauty trap and Zhang Quan cannot win him over with money, forming a stalemate.

And to think that running away was all that he ever wanted.

As all these complicated thoughts are running through his brain at the speed

of light, Zhu Xiuzhen had closed the door, embraced him tightly and buried her delicate face in his bosom. She emotionally questioned, “How can you be so cold towards Xiuzhen (me)?”

Xiang Shaolong can clearly feel her curvaceous body sending him waves of temptations. In his mind, he felt like treating her with tenderness. Despite knowing that she is faking everything, he feels sorry for her.

He did not hug her in return, nor did he push her away. Standing there without any reaction, he plainly advised, “Miss Xiuzhen, there is no need to do this. Just tell me what you need and I will do it for you.”

Zhu Xiuzhen raised her striking face and burst out in tears. She heart-wrenchingly cried: “I am so frightened!”

Xiang Shaolong did not expect her to use this tactic. His heart softened: “Miss Xiuzhen!”

Zhu Xiuzhen buried her face on his wider-than-average chest and cried even harder, wetting the front of his shirt.

Xiang Shaolong frantically comforted her, supporting her to her bed and seating her on the bed’s edge. He allowed her to continue hugging his neck and being in his bosom while helping to dry her tears. Eventually, she stopped crying and wailing but she still shudders occasionally (due to the heavy crying).

He is confident that it is a fake show with true feelings.

The feelings are obviously not feelings of love, but feelings of fear about her unknown future.

Zhu Xiuzhen woefully commented, “You should know about Mistress (Feng Fei) intention to disband the Song & Dance Troupe and her plans to use us (courtesans) as gifts to secure her friendship with the rich and famous, allowing herself to leave unscathed.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck, “Are you sure?”

Zhu Xiuzhen assured, “It is definitely the truth. In the past, there were some sisters in the Troupe who left and got married into a rich family. Their lives took a turn for the worse. There were some who are beaten to death by the first wife and some who became prostitutes of the official brothels after their Lords lost power. Those who are neglected considered themselves lucky to have not suffered a worse fate. Xiuzhen (I) will rather choose to be dead than to live such a meaningless life.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Were all of you (courtesans) bought (as a slave or servant) by Mistress (Feng Fei)?”

Zhu Xiuzhen sorrowfully nodded, “She may appear to be treating us with kindness but it is because we are of some usefulness to her, such as supporting her in winning the title of the World’s Best Courtesan. In actual fact, she only makes plans for herself and we are just her tools.”

Xiang Shaolong can tell that she is getting desperate, causing her to confide

her insecurities in him. He laments the detestable status of womenfolk in these ancient times and that he is unable to contribute to her situation. He wondered, “You are telling me all your secrets. Aren’t you concerned that I may betray you to Mistress (Feng Fei)?”

Zhu Xiuzhen bitterly smiled, “I have seen all kinds of men and you are the kind who is full of justice. I have judged you erroneously in the beginning but I will not repeat this mistake. Now, I can only cast aside my pride and beg for your assistance.”

She added, “We are sheltered women who knew nothing except our (Song & Dance) routines. When we leave the Troupe, we will be at a disadvantage and would likely be bullied wherever we go.”

Xiang Shaolong proclaimed, “But you have to get married eventually!”

Zhu Xiuzhen raised her head, facing Xiang Shaolong with a tear-stained face. She gently mentioned, “It would be good if we need not get married. All of us (courtesans) have saved our money well and can live the rest of our lives without worrying about food or clothing. Nonetheless, we do require someone to make proper arrangements for us. Now that Sa Li has been dismissed by Mistress (Feng Fei), I can only come to you.”

In an instant, she lowered her head and insisted, “Even if I must get married, I hope my partner will not know about my past as a courtesan. Xiuzhen (I) would rather be a dedicated wife of a poor man than to become a concubine or mistress of a rich man”

Xiang Shaolong had a sudden brainwave. This is the crux of the matter that he has been trying to comprehend.

Within the Song & Dance Troupe, there is the ambitious Dong Shuzen whose aim is to take over Feng Fei's position and the unambitious ones like Zhu Xiuzhen, who only wish to lead an ordinary life from the money that she has made by performing and sleeping with the rich.

Regardless of their goals, everyone wants to be free, to be the master of their own destiny, to forge a life of happiness and independence.

For the first time ever, he is weighing his options about leaving. Even if he can flee successfully, will he bear to leave them in the lurch? The best option is to arrange for them to settle down in Qin. On one hand, they will be spared the atrocities of war and on the other hand, they will be safe under his protection.

As long as they are willing, Xiang Shaolong would have no trouble finding them a good home, given their exceptional appearances.

However, he is now fighting for his own survival, not to mention the Troupe internal bickering and Zhang Quan the traitor. With all these weighing down on him, will he still be able to make a difference in their lives? He decided to test Zhu Xiuzhen's sincerity and warmly enquired, "Sa Li was dismissed because of me. Did you ever think taking revenge for him?"

Zhu Xiuzhen's body shivered, "No wonder you did not come to my room! You have uncovered my scheme! Xiuzhen (I) earnestly offer you my apologies. I

will accept any punishment from you.”

Of course Xiang Shaolong did not ‘punish’ her. He even made up his mind to not get involved with any girl from the Song & Dance Troupe, preventing himself from being entangled in a relationship burden.

In this moment, he pledges to do his best for these vulnerable girls of the Song & Dance Troupe, allowing each of them to live a life of liberty. In a way, he hopes this gesture will help to redeem some of sins his fellow men have accumulated.

He tactfully rejected Zhu Xiuzhen’s advances and returned to his room, sharing his encounters with Xiao Yuetan.

Xiao Yuetan nodded, “Although some risks are involved, a man should overcome difficulties with courage and strength in whatever he does. Frankly speaking, I feel sorry for them as well but my resources are limited. If we can arrange for them to migrate to Xianyang (Capital City of Qin), you can use this opportunity to travel home, reuniting with your family and they can find a safe abode. It will be two perfect endings.”

Xiang Shaolong thought hard and frowned, “But Feng Fei has her own plans and she will not be sharing them with us.”

Xiao Yuetan assured, “She is quite dependent on you and therefore, you must be playing a crucial role in her grand plan. You can simply follow her plan and gather clues in the meantime. Our main priority now is for you to start familiarizing yourself with different members of the Troupe. When you

are able to command them like commanding an army for war, you can accomplish your duties more easily.”

Xiang Shaolong groaned, “Sa Li’s supporters have now pledged their allegiance to Zhang Quan. Most of the troupe members appear to be respectful but in reality, they are hostile and cannot wait to witness my downfall. This is my biggest challenge now. It is impossible to win their trust in such a short space of time.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed, “Zhang Quan is just a clown and hardly a threat to us. All I need is to give the command and he will disappear from our lives forever. Nevertheless, we should find out who is the main perpetrator. Only when we understand our enemy fully can we have a chance at victory.”

Xiang Shaolong suggested, “Unless we resort to torturing him, he may not divulge his employer’s identity.”

Xiao Yuetan dismissed, “In terms of scheming, your elder brother (me) is way better than you. Using torture is an inferior strategy, potentially causing him to give us false names, which we have no way of verifying. Ha! I have a more sensational plan where we can get rid of Zhang Quan and win the hearts of the people at the same time.” He leaned towards Xiang Shaolong’s ear and began whispering.

After listening to his suggestion, Xiang Shaolong praised, “Luckily we were best friends from the very beginning. Otherwise, I would have lost to Lu Buwei a long time ago.”

A heavy snow descended from the skies after lunch.

The fleet of ships is about twenty sailing hours away from Lin Zi. They will arrive in this Qi melting pot of different arts and culture tomorrow morning.

With his new mindset, Xiang Shaolong tried his best to understand the affairs of the Song & Dance Troupe. Flipping through the past accounts, he came to realize that besides receiving substantial remunerations for their performances, the valuables presented by the rich and powerful are enough to fill more than forty chests.

Whoever marrying Feng Fei is equivalent to inheriting this astronomical amount of wealth and treasure. It is gaining both money and beauty in one swoop.

He has his doubts about Zhang Quan's theory of Feng Fei and her secret admirer. Perhaps Zhang Quan hopes to be lucky man himself! When Feng Fei went to rehearse her (Song & Dance) routine after dinner, Xiang Shaolong used this opportunity to initiate a visit to Zhang Quan.

Zhang Quan was elated to see him coming and exclaimed, "I was about to pay you a visit."

After sitting down and receiving a cup of tea from Zhang Quan, Xiang Shaolong muttered, "Mistress (Feng Fei) summoned me this morning, promising to reward me with 100 ingots of gold and an official appointment in Qi. Honestly speaking, everyone is after fame and fortune. Now that Mistress is going to promote me in Qi, if Brother Zhang is in my shoes, would

you reject such an offer?"

His face turning slightly pale, Zhang Quan guaranteed after some consideration, "The mastermind employing me is known for his wealth and his net worth is much more than Feng Fei's. Nonetheless, I must seek his permission before I can formally endorse a matching offer for you. I am confident I can secure at least 150 ingots of gold."

From his words, Xiang Shaolong deduced that unless the person is from Qi, he would be one of the dignitaries visiting Lin Zi for the birthday celebrations (of King of Qi). Otherwise, Zhang Quan will not be able to report to him with such convenience.

Unsatisfied with just this intelligence, he shook his head, "Brother Zhang need not go to the extent! Money may be important but holding an official position has always been my dream. Mistress (Feng Fei) is on good terms with many influential individuals. Everyone will have to grant her some allowances."

Zhang Quan interrupted, "Brother Shen is a wise man. When we are discussing prominent characters, the topic will ultimately conclude that Qin has the most of such talents. My employer is a powerhouse in Qin. If Brother Shen wants to gain official appointment, you can join me in submitting to him. Otherwise, you may not enjoy your official appointment for long before you become the citizen of a conquered state."

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart thumping wildly, for this Mastermind could well be Lu Buwei.

Based on Lu Buwei's lustful and possessive personality, coupled with Feng Fei's previous visit to Xianyang, it is not unlikely that she has drawn his attention.

With his wealth and authority, bribing someone like Zhang Quan is as easy as ABC.

As Lu Buwei is on his way to Lin Zi and matching with Zhang Quan's description, Xiang Shaolong construed that his invisible opponent is none other than Lu Buwei.

Treacherous and merciless are the two best words to describe him.

But with Tian Dan's support, it will not be easy to trounce him.

Faking disbelief, he pondered, "Who can it be?"

Zhang Quan sighed, "I would tell you if I can. But if I, Zhang Quan, told you any lies, may I die a horrible death. Brother Shen can put your mind at ease!"

Xiang Shaolong probed, "A cunning rabbit is killed; a traitor is beheaded. If he went back on his words after obtaining Mistress (Feng Fei), Brother Zhang and I would not only failed to receive any benefits but may even have to forfeit our lives."

Zhang Quan disagreed, "Your description is very heartrending but you can rest assured that we will not be played out. This man is famous for the

countless family warriors he hosts at his residence. He appreciates talent much more than your old employer Prince Wuji. There are numerous scholars and heroes he recruited all over the land. I am sure there is a place for you in his residence. Brother Shen can trust my judgment.”

Xiang Shaolong insisted, “This is only based on Brother Zhang’s opinion. How about this! Get him to pay me half of my reward as a deposit. I will only cooperate with Brother Zhang when I see my money.”

Zhang Quan was relieved, “This should not be a problem. However, let me warn you in advance. In the event that Brother Shen took his money and yet failed to fulfill your obligations, you can forget about leaving Lin Zi alive.”

Xiang Shaolong laughed, “A gentleman’s word is his bond. Fortunately, I did not agree to Mistress (Feng Fei) terms immediately and used a delaying tactic.”

Zhang Quan was delighted, “This is wonderful. Brother Shen should try to get closer to Mistress and find out who her allies are or who her mystery man is. When I report to my employer, at least I have some results to show him and it will be easier to ask for your deposit money.”

Xiang Shaolong firmly state, “I will naturally tell you everything I know once I see my money. Brother Zhang should know me by now. This deal is cash on delivery.”

Zhang Quan could not negotiate further and nodded in agreement.

Xiang Shaolong was humoured. Having come all the way to Qi, he is still locking horns with Lu Buwei.

Xiao Yuetan will be overjoyed if he knows about this.

Both of them are well versed with Lu Buwei character and schemes. They are in a superior position because they understand their enemy well, as mentioned in Sun Tzu's Art of War.

Lu Buwei, on the other hand, knows nothing about them. Even with Tian Dan's partnership, he may not gain the upper hand.

Moreover, Tian Dan himself is intertwined in a power tussle within his own state (the crown prince selection). With the prized Feng Fei at the centre of another skirmish, Xiao Yuetan and he can make excellent use of the circumstances to create plenty of chaos, eventually beating Lu Buwei soundly for good measure.

Relishing these thoughts, he cannot be bothered with Zhang Quan anymore and took his leave.

Outside his room, he had barely taken a few steps when someone called out his name from behind. It turned out to be Little Ping'er glaring coldly at him.

Xiang Shaolong stopped walking. Little Ping'er came to his front and interrogated in a harsh manner, "Did you just come out of Zhang Quan's room?"

Xiang Shaolong can only nod his head.

Little Ping'er blew her top, "What tricks are you up to? Are you thinking of betraying Mistress (Feng Fei)?"

From her expression, Xiang Shaolong predicted that Feng Fei has told Little Ping'er about his stand (on not wanting to marry Little Ping'er), causing her extensive suffering. It is better not to give her false hopes anyway so Xiang Shaolong allowed her to vent her frustrations. He whispered, "Do I look like such a person? This is not a good place to talk. Is Sister Ping looking for me?"

Her two eyes reddening on the spot, Little Ping'er stomped her feet, "Who wants to look for a heartless beast like you? It is Mistress (Feng Fei) looking for you."

His heart softening, Xiang Shaolong explained in gentle tone, "Can you please listen to me? I... .."

Covering her ears with both hands, Little Ping'er cried, "I don't want to hear anything from you." Before her sentence is completed, tears of emotion are flowing out of her eyes. She left crying.

Xiang Shaolong can only shake his head and give a bitter smile.

Since he must be heartless to her, he might as well make it the first and only time.

He really cannot afford the implications of love.

Isn't Feng Fei busy rehearsing? Why is she looking for him?

Chapter 06

A Fight To The End

There are several major changes to Feng Fei's 'The Immortal Phoenix Arising', showcasing a moving storyline with stages upon stages of spellbinding dances. Feng Fei had just composed an excellent opening song sang together by all the courtesans, singing about the Immortals in the Heaven Realm and the humans having a celebration on the Human Realm.

Feng Fei's talent in the Song & Dance industry is without a doubt and her only concern is lack of inspiration. With Xiang Shaolong lighting a spark of creativity, the overflowing of ideas that followed resembles the bursting of a river dam. Presently, she has an abundance of materials to work on and there is no looking back.

As Xiang Shaolong was cheering and clapping with the other serving maids, Feng Fei came to his side with her eyes glimmering. She joyfully enquired, "Shen Liang, is it much better now?"

Xiang Shaolong sincerely praised, "Mistress's performance is like a magical journey, with the main concept delicately inserted multiple times into the routine, just like a master weaving cotton. This results in a dazzling and attention grabbing sequence. If Mistress were to add your singing to the finale, even the stubborn rocks will bow."

An indescribable pleasure flashed across Feng Fei's lovely eyes. For the first

time ever, she held the corner of his sleeve, pulling him to a corner far away from the crowd. She gestured to Dong Shuzen and her fellow courtesans, instructing them to continue the rehearsal before emotionally sighing, “Feng Fei (I) has never heard such a moving portrayal about my production. Ai! Will the stubborn rocks really bow when they are impressed? This is the greatest glory a singer can ever receive. Shen Liang ah! What should I do with you?”

Xiang Shaolong cursed himself for stealing the limelight again, repeating his past deed of using the phrase ‘absolute power corrupts absolutely’ to win the affections of Talented Lady Ji. He has inadvertently made inroads into Feng Fei’s heart. However, this proves that Zhang Quan’s theory is correct.

If Feng Fei did not have a secret lover, she would not have sigh and fall into a dilemma. He naturally would not snatch her away from her lover and has no desire to get involved with this peerless beauty, despite having feelings for her. He humbly admitted, “My own creative mood has been unleashed after watching Mistress’s performance, causing me to come up with these proverbs.”

Feng Fei stared deeply into his eyes, her shoulder slightly touching his and began chirping like a little girl, “My main song is almost completed save for a few amendments. Heaven has really been kind to me, allowing me to meet a bosom friend like you before my retirement.”

Using this opening, Xiang Shaolong began, “If Mistress can place all her trust and share all her secrets with me, I, Shen Liang, can guarantee with my life that Mistress will have all her dreams come true.”

Feng Fei was taken aback, “Are you implying that I am hiding information from you?”

If Xiang Shaolong do not display some might, it will be impossible to force her to succumb. His eyes shimmering with deathly cold rays, his stare pierce straight into her enthralling eyes as he hissed, “Does Mistress know who is the perpetrator behind Zhang Quan?”

Feng Fei cannot bear to look at him and lowered her eyes, replying, “Isn’t it Suzhen?”

Xiang Shaolong icily laughed, “Second Mistress is just another pathetic victim fighting for her own survival.”

Feng Fei is offended, “What are you talking about?”

Facing Xiang Shaolong for a moment, she lowered her glance again and pleaded, “Can you stop staring at me?”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling wonderful, knowing that she will no longer be able to control him like before. He pressed on, “Zhang Quan is now serving Lu Buwei.”

Her face losing colour, Feng Fei exclaimed, “What?”

Xiang Shaolong repeated, “Mistress is now in grave danger. Lu Buwei is on intimate terms with the people of Qi and with the power he wields in Qin, there is hardly anyone who would dare to offend him. If he wishes to obtain

Mistress, it is not an unachievable task.”

Appearing to have lost her self-control after hearing the name of the man and his evil doings, Feng Fei grabbed Xiang Shaolong’s shoulder and gasped, “What should we do? Why don’t I sack Zhang Quan immediately?”

With her petite hand pulling his own shoulder, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart melting. Preventing other feelings from arising, he seriously articulated, “Mistress needs to make a choice. One, you put your complete trust in me. Two, you let me go. If you are indecisive, the consequences will be unimaginable. For example, Lu Buwei can send him men to take Mistress away by force and at the same time, announce to the world that you have decided to retire and marry into his family. I doubt there will be anyone who will contest his words or even raise an objection. Mistress should know better than me that once you have spent a single night in his custody, your future will be gone.”

Feng Fei was at a loss, “Do you have a plan to counter him?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “I will make use of Zhang Quan to convey a false message to Lu Buwei that Mistress’s lover is someone that even he (Lu Buwei) cannot afford to antagonize. Thus, he can only wait for you to leave before launching a covert attack, buying us more time.”

Feng Fei heaved a sigh of relief and scrutinized him with suspicion before muttering, “You are really formidable and do not fear Lu Buwei one bit. You even speak like you are very familiar with his methods. Ai! Without you, there will be no one else can I can depend on.”

Xiang Shaolong realized that she had gathered her wits and apparently decided, “Mistress is only depending on me but has yet to trust me. Since I am unable to secure your confidence, I, Shen Liang, will depart tomorrow morning once we arrive in Lin Zi. I do not wish to die a meaningless death.”

Feng Fei glanced at him with confusion for some time before submitting, “The more I get to know you, the more I realize that you are not as simple as you look. Fine! Let’s talk in my room.”

Xiang Shaolong was jubilant. Using a combination of hard and soft tactics to keep up the pressure, this beauty has finally made concessions.

Feng Fei sat down by his side with a kind expression. She gently inquired, “What do you want me to tell you?”

Xiang Shaolong interrogated, “Since Mistress has the courage to go to Lin Zi, there must be someone guaranteeing your safety. Who is this person?”

Feng Fei delayed, “There is indeed such a person. Can I reveal his identity at a more suitable time in the future?”

Xiang Shaolong does not want to push his luck and nodded, “Fine. After the disbandment of the Song & Dance Troupe, may I ask what are Mistress’s plans for the other courtesans and where is Mistress intending to retire to?”

Showing signs of hesitation, Feng Fei lightly exhaled, “I have made appropriate plans for them. Can Manager Shen not interfere in these

matters?"

Xiang Shaolong was irritated, "How can I ignore this matter? Right now, all the courtesans are feeling restless precisely because they are worried about their future. I, Shen Liang, may be down and out but my fighting spirit has not deserted me. I will not allow Mistress to destroy their (courtesans) future."

The captivating eyes of Feng Fei flashed with anger before calming down. She dolefully justified, "We are all forced by circumstances and some things cannot be prevented. If that lass Dong Shuzen did not leak the news of my retirement, there would not be so many complicated matters right now."

Xiang Shaolong clarified, "I believed you have misunderstood Second Mistress. Based on my analysis, it is probably Zhang Quan who leaked this information to Lu Buwei and Lu Buwei intentionally broadcasted this news, thereby creating the conditions for him to openly seize you for his own gratification."

Feng Fei appeared to be deep in thought. Subsequently, she insisted with determination, "But I have already given my word to somebody about the future of Dong Shuzen and the courtesans. This cannot be changed. Moreover, this person is someone I dare not offend."

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered, "There is nothing in the world that cannot be changed. Putting this aside for the time being, Mistress has yet to answer my question."

Feng Fei whined, "Must I really answer you? As long as you bring me out of

Lin Zi without anyone's knowledge, there will be a person to receive me and you can walk away a free man. On top of that, you will be handsomely rewarded and need not worry about money for the rest of your life."

Flapping his sleeve, Xiang Shaolong stood up, "At the end of the day, you are still unwilling to trust me. I know Tian Dan is somewhat involved and he must be the same person who is supposed to guarantee your safety. That explains your earlier anxiety and why you are treating me with such kindness! Forget it! From this moment on, we have nothing to do with each other."

Feng Fei was utterly shocked and in a moment of fear, she hugged him and wailed, "There is nothing I can hide from you. Heavens, what kind of person are you? Pray take your seat again and let us discuss this further."

Xiang Shaolong scorned, "This is just a simple assumption. Since you have someone in Lin Zi guaranteeing your safety, why do you need Shen Liang (me) around?"

Feng Fei placed her exquisite face against his wide chest and gave a flustered response, "You are able to make a correct guess because you are aware of the friendship between Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. Ai! If not for Lu Buwei personally telling me that Tian Dan will guarantee my safety, I would not have made this trip to Lin Zi. I did not expect Lu Buwei to harbor such hideous motives."

Xiang Shaolong reminded, "You must not forget that I have served both Great General Lian (Po) and Prince Wuji. Of course I will know about Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's partnership. Both of them are lustful perverts while the

ladies in the Song & Dance Troupe are all rare beauties; how can they not bear malicious intentions? Even if your safety is guaranteed by someone else, unless he is your lover, it will probably be another trap.”

Feng Fei’s world came crashing down and she is using all her strength to hug him tightly. She mourned, “What should I do?”

Ever since she discovered that Zhang Quan is working for Lu Buwei, her normal confidence and calmness have vanished into thin air. Xiang Shaolong lent his support to her and simply questioned, “First of all, you must tell me the truth. Besides Lu Buwei, is there anyone else who is interested in you?”

An embarrassed Feng Fei straightened her posture in front of him. With a complicated look in her eyes, she confessed, “It is obviously someone with considerable standing. On this trip to Qi, the cause of my greatest worry is Zongsun Long. He does not hold any official appointment but his influence in Qi is not below Tian Dan . The talented men serving him are immeasurable and he supports the Second Prince Tian Jian. He is at loggerheads with Tian Dan who supports the First Prince Tian Sheng. When I was in Daliang (Wei Capital), he came all the way to look for me but was harshly rebuffed by myself. Disillusioned, he took his leave and swore an oath that since he is unable to lay his hands on me, others can forget about doing the same.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned, “Are you referring to that bloodthirsty loan shark?”

Feng Fei is no longer surprised at his wealth of knowledge. She nodded, “That is the man. It is rumoured that his net worth has exceeded that of Wu Shijie and he has spies, followers and debtors in every state. Now you can

understand the reason for my uneasiness.”

Xiang Shaolong quizzed, “And who is the man unafraid of Zongsun Long?”

Feng Fei whispered, “He is Han Chuang. You should have heard of his name!”

Xiang Shaolong rolled his eyes, “Han Chuang?”

Feng Fei was astonished, “You know him personally?”

Xiang Shaolong lied, “I have heard of this person but did not expect it to be him. This man is famous for his lust. How you can trust a man like that?”

Feng Fei divulged, “He may hanker after pleasures of the flesh but he is quite a nice person. Since we are talking about him, I might as well tell you everything! I have pledged to reward him with Dong Shuzen and the courtesans, as a form of thanking him for his aid. There! I have told you everything.”

Xiang Shaolong prompted, “There is just one more thing. Who is Mistress’s secret lover?”

Feng Fei contemplated for some time before she suddenly embraced him around his shoulder and waist, gently demanding, “I can tell you who he is but you must swear not to tell anyone else.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and forcefully held back his own desire to embrace her in return. He proceeded to give his word and Feng Fei dreamily

disclosed, “This man is famous beyond words. Recently, he created plenty of trouble for the Six Eastern States.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his head becoming numb. Could it be that Feng Fei is in love with himself? Is she heading to Qin to find him after disbanding the Troupe? Feng Fei announced, “He is Xiang Shaolong, the most feared man amongst the Six Eastern States.”

Despite expecting her to mention his own name, Xiang Shaolong could not help but shuddered, “Does he love you?”

Feng Fei raised her face and look at him, astounded, “What are you asking such a strange question?”

Xiang Shaolong suddenly realized that she is still keeping this secret from him and is just using another name to satisfy his curiosity. His mind evaluating her words like a super computer, he is confident that her secret lover cannot be himself. Otherwise, Dan Meimei would have told him so.

At the same time, he concluded that this person is from Qin. All he has to do is to escort her back to Xianyang and she can reunite with her lover. He joked, “In this case, I will have to deliver you to Zhongmou.”

In his mind, he could understand her reason for keeping this an absolute secret. If the mystery man’s identity is exposed, Lu Buwei will surely kill him. Recalling the time at Drunken Wind Brothel when she was supposed to assassinate himself but subsequently changed her mind, it could be due to her newfound love with this man. This man could be the same reason behind

her desire to retire and settle down. As anticipated, Feng Fei objected, “No! He has given instructions for me to wait for him in Xianyang. All you need to do is to send me to Xianyang.”

Enraged, Xiang Shaolong locked Feng Fei in a bear hug and wildly kissed her with a vengeance. Feng Fei put up a fierce struggle but eventually capitulated to his warm lips. There were signs of resistance but she ultimately accepted this invasion. Breaking the kiss, he scanned her perfect complexion and well-defined features before elaborating, “This is me punishing Mistress for withholding information from me. You can hate me all you like but presently, only I, Shen Liang, am able to prevent you from being Zongsun Long’s prisoner. Except for me, anybody else would have a hidden agenda for helping you.”

Feng Fei’s shapely body turned into jelly and collapsed into his bosom, “Don’t you have a hidden agenda too?”

Since she did not deny lying to him, Xiang Shaolong retained his goodwill towards her. Putting his arms around her shoulder, he advised, “If I had come to you with ill intentions, I can easily force myself on you, taking Mistress’s precious chastity right now. Think about it!” Finishing his words, he strode off.

Although he is unable to explain it, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart brimming with happiness. Ever since Li Mu beat him to a pulp and causing him to lead a fugitive life, all his accumulated frustration has been released in that one long kiss. He can feel his fighting spirit soaring, reminding him of the time he disguised himself as Dong Horse Fanatic, and heading to Handan City

to capture Zhao Mu. The only difference is that besides Xiao Yuetan aiding him, he can only depend on the sword hanging around his waist. He may have to hide his sword as someone may identify him through it. In this moment, he made up his mind to indulge in another round with Lu Buwei and Tian Dan. No matter what, he must do his best to liberate these oppressed ladies. This is his way of giving back to society.

Chapter 07

Ancient Capital Of Lin Zi

The founding King of Qi is Lu Shang. After King Zhouwu annihilated the Zhou Dynasty and set up Western Zhou, he assigned Lu Shang to Qi and bestowed him the position of Protector Jiang. He built the capital named Yin Qiu but was later renamed Lin Zi.

Surviving through the periods of Western and Eastern Zhou dynasties, Qi remains a vast country with flourishing commerce, coupled with lucrative fishing and salt trade. It is a strong and prosperous nation.

Qi has been a dominant force during the Spring & Autumn Period, mainly due to the efforts of King Qi Hengong and his Premier Guan Zhong. Together, they introduced a set of reforms that strengthened the country significantly. The wealth and growth of the nation is comparable to the Golden Age of Qin. The country is doing well by all accounts and can be considered a superpower.

Another crucial factor is the conquest of the Laiyi Tribe residing at its borders.

As early as when the Protector is conducting his nation building, the Laiyi Tribe, which shares the sea border with Qi, began to launch aggressive attacks. The hostility continued on and off for several years until Qi officially routed them in 567 BC.

Not only did Qi finally rid itself of a persistent thorn in its flesh, the country's land occupation increased by more than 50%. In addition, it now owns the entire sea border, compared to owning half of it previously.

The people of Qi are known tyrants and constantly harassed the nearby State of Lu and conquer smaller surrounding States. Using the Alliance of Zhaoling, it even managed to wrest control of the State of Zheng from the powerful Chu. Chu is located at the south of Qi.

Due to the alliance and with Qi in the way, Chu is unable to expand northwards and focused their armies on expanding their territory southeast. Qi can only watch on helplessly.

The Alliance of Zhaoling signals the peak of Qi's military expeditions. In the same breath, it signifies the crowning glory of Qi Heng Gong and Guan Zhong's career.

After their two deaths, the authority of Qi descended into a power tussle between five princes. Without a commanding figure, it is now the time for the other States to showcase their might.

During the period of the Warring States, Qi got General Sun Bin to attack Wei in an attempt to save Zhao from Wei's armies. The invasion was a success and soon, the Qi army has reach Daliang. The next year, the army of Wei was soundly defeated by the army of Qi at Maling. From then on, Qi has replaced Wei as the leading state of eastern China and the States of Wei, Zhao and Han pays tribute to Qi.

With newfound ambition and taking advantage of Yan's internal strife, Qi invaded Yan and occupied the capital of Yan for three years before recalling their armies.

King Qi Xuan arrogantly proclaimed: "One superpower against another, tasting victory in 5 days." It is truly a feat that even the powerful Qin has yet to accomplished.

Chu declined in strength and Sanjing was broken up, resulting in Qi and Qin becoming the two strongest states in China. Qi is in the east and Qin is in the west.

Just when Qi was tasting every success and occupying countless new territories, they realized that war had emptied their treasury. Bearing intense hatred for Qi, Yan made use of this golden opportunity to launch a joint attack with Qin, Chu, Wei, Zhao and Han.

Yan General Yue Yi overran Lin Zi and repeated the atrocities Qi inflicted in the capital of Yan thirty years ago. Every single piece of valuable, treasure, carriage or weapon is not spared from plundering. If not for Tian Dan turning the tide and defeating the army of Yan, Lin Zi will be burnt to the ground.

Nevertheless, much of Qi has been pillaged or destroyed, and the country is once again in decline.

By the time Xiang Shaolong arrived in Lin Zi, another thirty years have come and gone. In a similar fashion, Tian Dan has declined from the powerhouse

he once was to his twilight years where he faces challenges to his authority.

The City of Lin Zi was built along the west shore of River Zi and is actually two cities linked together, namely Big City and Small City. The total surface area of the Big City and the Small City is approximately sixty square miles.

Within the city, the buildings are grand and imposing. The Qi Palace is situated at the north of the Small City and all major roads are constructed with the palace as a central guideline. The monasteries of Qi and residences of officials are within proximity of the palace. The two sides of the roads are lined with ancient tall trees but their branches are covered with icicles due to the harsh weather.

Although it had suffered the carnages of war, Lin Zi has recovered speedily to become a lively civilization. The city is well populated and the economy is thriving.

As the fleet of ships docked at the east of the city, all the noteworthy officials and men of importance had gathered around, welcoming the world famous courtesan Feng Fei.

A waiting military band began to conjure a friendly tune as Feng Fei elegantly came ashore with Little Ping'er supporting her. Her curvaceous figure, graceful walking style and delicate features left the audience awe-struck.

Following behind Feng Fei are Dong Shuzen and the twelve courtesans, causing everyone to stare at them without blinking.

Xiang Shaolong had identified Tian Dan among the welcoming party and quickly mingled among the family warriors, making it harder to be identified by Tian Dan's sharp observation skills.

In reality, the likelihood of being spotted is not high.

As directed by Xiao Yuetan, he is wearing a worker's shirt with a woolen lamb fur jacket on the outside. Below his shirt, he is wearing a cloth belt in order to conceal his muscular waist and at the same time, create a fake potbelly.

Standing on the pier, Tian Dan, as well as the rich and powerful residents of Qi, was all dressed either in deer fur coats or fox fur coats. A shirt is worn outside the coat, covering the animal fur, enhancing the exquisiteness of their appearances.

Humans are judged firstly by their external looks. By simply downplaying his dressing, Xiang Shaolong is not as prominent looking as before.

Under Xiao Yuetan's skillful hands, his facial complexion has darkened and is easily mistaken for a man ten years his senior. The effect is so startling that when looking at his own reflection in a bronze mirror, even Xiang Shaolong cannot believe the difference between his current look and his previously handsome looks.

Xiao Yuetan and Feng Fei are the first batch of people to disembark the ship and were exchanging pleasantries with the welcoming party.

As the sky is still snowing, Feng Fei climbed into her carriage immediately and

entered the city under the escort of the Qi soldiers.

Xiang Shaolong dared not ride a horse and sneaked into Xiao Yuetan's carriage, admiring: "You seemed to be highly respected in Qi."

Xiao Yuetan humbly begged his pardon before commenting: "We are the prepared (ones) observing the unprepared (ones). I paid extra attention to Tian Dan and except for Feng Fei, he did not bother to look anyone else. Ai! Comparing his looks from the last time I saw him, he seemed to have aged a lot."

The carriage is moving in a huge convoy, entering the city in an unhurried manner.

Xiao Yuetan educated: "The Big City has 8 city gates. The two horizontal roads going from the east to the west are named Great Eastern Way and Great Western Way, while the two vertical roads running from the north to the south are named Great Southern Way and Great Northern Way. It is rather easy to remember."

Peering out of the carriage window, Xiang Shaolong thought to himself: Like it or not, I am finally here in Lin Zi; let's pray I can leave here in one piece!

With a strong wind and snow blowing through the city, there are only a handful of pedestrians. The pedestrians are walking briskly and gazed at the convoy with curiosity.

Xiao Yuetan suggested: "At the intersection of the four Great Ways, there is a

district known as 'Little Lin Zi'. It is the most vibrant and dynamic locality, a must see for all travellers. I will bring you there tonight and join in the festivities!

Xiang Shaolong objected: "Shouldn't I avoid taking on such a high profile?"

Xiao Yuetan counseled: "The more you try to hide, the more attention you will draw to yourself. Even if you do not provoke the suspicions of outsiders, you will trigger the doubts of Zhang Quan and his men eventually."

Xiang Shaolong can only agree: "As per your guidance!"

Ever since he learnt that Lu Buwei is Zhang Quan's mastermind, Xiao Yuetan is on cloud 9. Currently, he is still basking with joy. Pointing to a gigantic mansion along the journey, he articulated: "These are the residences of the wealthy citizens, with multiple courtyards, tiled roofs and whitewashed walls. Compared to the single courtyard houses along the streets for the common folks, it is a world of difference."

Xiang Shaolong took a closer look at his surroundings, discovering that they are now travelling on Great Eastern Way. The road is 7 metres wide, allowing up to 4 carriages to travel side by side. Both sides of the road are lined with shops.

There are lanes intersecting the main road where the ordinary locals reside. The lanes made of common materials and are only meant for walking.

The network of roads in Lin Zi is well organized and the city is littered with

high walls and huge mansions. The façade of the buildings are very well maintained, in order to live up to the reputation as the Capital of Qi.

Xiang Shaolong abruptly felt that this is a worthwhile trip.

Xiao Yuetan pointed out: “Little Lin Zi has the highest concentration of businesses and you can buy whatever your heart desires. The fortune tellers there are well-known among all the States.”

Because of the description ‘Well-known among all the States’, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of Qixia Sword Saint Cao Quidao. He inquired: “Where is Qixia College (I am changing from school to college)?”

Xiao Yuetan gladly imparted: “It is located at the west of the city, beyond Qi gate. It is an impressive, lofty and spectacular structure. All the teachers who teaches there are specially titled: Qixia Tutor and the students are termed: Qixia Mates. They numbered a few thousand.”

Pausing, he continued: “I have had the honour of being invited there to lecture on music and healing. Thus, I enjoy the respect equivalent of a Marquis.”

Xiang Shaolong whispered: “I wondered if Zou Yan has arrived?”

Xiao Yuetan frowned: “I am not sure about that.”

Recalling Shan Rou, Xiang Shaolong had the inclination to seek her.

Xiao Yuetan added: “Being a Qixia Tutor is quite a feat. Nevertheless, there are outstanding individuals who are conferred a Professorship. They are the only ones who can debate politics besides the Qi Court. Zou Yan is one of them. I can easily enquire about his whereabouts.”

Xiang Shaolong enquired: “What kind of man is Cao Quidao?”

His eyes emanating with respect, Xiao Yuetan whispered: “His prestige in Qi unmatched and he is the Master-Mentor of the King of Qi. Members of the royal family and officials have to kowtow to him whenever they run into him. He resides alone in a small hut outside Qixia College, leading a simple life. He should be reaching fifty years of age but resembles a thirty-year-old man instead. He does not grant audiences easily.”

Xiang Shaolong originally wanted to trace Shan Rou’s dwellings from him but after hearing these words, he gave up the idea.

Xiao Yuetan continued: “His sword skills have become legendary and due to a lack of challengers, he only participated in a few duels in the recent years.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Did he used to have many challengers?”

Xiao Yuetan responded: “Whoever defeats him will succeed him as the prestigious Qixia’s Sword Saint and his name will be known to the world. However, his sword shows no mercy and his challengers usually end up dead or seriously injured. As a result, at the present moment, no one dares to challenge him.”

If he still possess his Hundred Battle Sabre and can reveal his true identity, Xiang Shaolong would loved to pitch his skills against Cao Quidao's sword, desiring to know the level of his accomplishment. He is naturally looking at a friendly competition and not a life and death duel.

At this moment, the convoy has entered a VIP guesthouse along Great Eastern Way. They were assigned to Tingsong Villa, one of the sixteen Villas used to accommodate visiting dignitaries and distinguished guests.

Conscious that it is time for him to get to work, he swiftly scampered off the carriage and with Zhang Quan by his side, he liaise with the Villa Manager, allocating the rooms and storage of resources. By the time everything has been taken care of, half a day has gone by. It is now time for Feng Fei to enter the palace for a dinner banquet.

Tian Dan personally came to escort Feng Fei and Xiao Yuetan was Feng Fei's dining companion.

Xiang Shaolong intentionally came out to supervise matters, opening facing Tian Dan as well as his two bodyguards, the brothers, Liu Zhongxia and Liu Zhongshi. None of them were interested in this 'lowly servant'.

After sending Feng Fei off, Xiang Shaolong is exhilarated. If even someone as sharp as Tian Dan has failed to see though his disguise, he is confident he can fool the rest of the crowd.

After consuming their dinner, Dong Shuzen and the courtesans began rehearsing their Song & Dance routine as instructed by Feng Fei while Xiang

Shaolong headed to the eastern wing to look for Zhang Quan. Once the door has been closed, he proclaimed: "I have gained valuable intelligence about Feng Fei. If Brother Zhang can fork out the deposit now, I will report my findings to you."

Zhang Quan was thrilled: "Well done! However, my employer hasn't arrived in Lin Zi. I can only pay you the deposit two days later. Can Brother Shen prematurely share with me some of your discoveries?"

Xiang Shaolong acted mysterious: "She has someone in Qi who is guaranteeing her safety and he is none other than Tian Dan. Earlier on, Tian Dan was the man escorting her to the banquet. This man wields great authority in Qi and is not someone to be trifled with."

Zhang Quan knew the answer all along and is using this to test his allegiance. He wasn't affected by this revelation and simply replied: "I have my ways of dealing with him. He is not a threat."

Looking at his phony act of arrogance, Xiang Shaolong was amused and added: "However, our employer's opponent is not limited to Tian Dan alone. We have another formidable foe and his name is Zongsun Long. Has Brother Zhang heard of this man before?"

His face changing colour, Zhang Quan stammered: "What?"

Xiang Shaolong exaggerated: "Mistress confided in me personally about this man. Brother Zhang should know that in Daliang, Zongsun Long did approach her and asked for her hand in marriage. After he was rejected, he swore to

use every means possible to seize her for himself.”

Zhang Quan obviously knew about this matter and will not question the authenticity of Xiang Shaolong’s findings. He had a big frown and decided: “This piece of information is extremely important and must be made known to my employer as early as possible. Otherwise, we may be caught by surprise.”

He exhaled a breath of cool air: “This man is a bloodthirsty loan shark. His methods are devious and merciless; even the rich and the powerful dare not offend him. His greatest strength lies in the countless talented men serving him. He will be a force to reckon with.”

Xiang Shaolong was momentarily distracted as he recalled how he overcome Feng Fei’s resistance and enjoyed a long kiss with her last night. He can feel his loins stirring and quickly corrected his emotions.

Quietly contemplating for some time, Zhang Quan probed: “Brother Shen Liang, you are truly capable to gather all these critical information in such a short span of time. Have you determined who is Mistress’s secret lover?”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “I trust Brother Zhang and therefore, I have revealed a few discoveries to you. Regarding the other secrets, Brother Zhang should know what I want. Forgive me for withholding my tongue.”

There is nothing Zhang Quan can do to him. He sighed: “We must cooperate fully with each other. Otherwise, not only will we fail in our mission, we will die without a complete corpse. Ai! I would rather offend the King of Qi than

offend Zongsun Long.”

Suddenly, the sound of knocking can be heard.

Opening his door for a look, Zhang Quan found himself facing more than ten family warriors and drivers. They are asking to see Manager Shen.

Their leader is Xiang Shaolong’s ex roommate, the primate-looking young chap Lei Yun’er. To Xiang Shaolong who has just come to the door, Lei Yun’er pleaded: “We are very bored here and would like to go for a walk outside. Would Manger please give his permission?”

Looking at their eager expressions, Xiang Shaolong knows that he will incur their wrath if he does not approve their requests. He smiled: “I will not stand in your way but please remember to behave yourself and come back before dawn.”

The crowd went hysterical and cheerfully left.

Beside him, Zhang Quan advised: “Why did you allow them to go out? Zongsun Long is watching our every move. In a fit of anger, he may vent his frustrations on them.”

Xiang Shaolong disagreed: “It is unreasonable to live every second of our lives in fear of the unexpected. I believe Zongsun Long will not create any trouble before Mistress (Feng Fei) has completed her two performances. No matter what, he has to give face to the Tian Dan and the King of Qi!”

Zhang Quan disagreed: “Qi Xiang King is getting muddle-headed in his old age. He has appointed his eldest son Tian Sheng as the Crown Prince but stripped him of his title over an insignificant matter, causing everyone to feel uneasy. Currently, Zongsun Long is going out all to promote Second Prince Tian Jian to become the Crown Prince, clashing head-on with Tian Dan. It is Tian Dan’s idea to invite the three world-famous Courtesans, which includes Mistress (Feng Fei) to celebrate the birthday of the King of Qi, in order to get into his good books. For all you know, Zongsun Long will deliberately spoil his plans because of this reason.”

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is hearing about these developments. Feeling apprehensive on the spot, he bade farewell to Zhang Quan and left in a hurry.

At the main door, he checked with the sentries, asking them what is the direction Lei Yun’er & company had headed before giving chase.

As the rain and snow fell around him and the street lamps are being lighted along the streets of Lin Zi, he knows that due to extraordinary circumstances, he will inevitably be severely implicated in the power struggle for the position of the King of Qi.

Chapter 08

Local Villain

As Xiang Shaolong brisk-walked along the road, proceeding towards the central Little Lin Zi, he noticed the increase in the number of pedestrians. Under the illumination of the lanterns, the falling snowflakes resemble the Immortals sprinkling heavenly powder onto earth, giving his surroundings a dream-like appearance.

Most of his fellow foot-travellers are walking in small groups and are speaking in different dialects. They are probably admirers of the Three Courtesans from the other six States or even the Qi people from the countryside. The locals only made up a handful of the crowd.

According to Xiao Yuetan, Lin Zi is home to approximately seventy thousand households and has a population of three hundred thousand. Compared to Xianyang, it is far less populated.

As he was beginning to panic in his search for Lei Yun'er & company, he caught someone waving at him across the road. It turns out to be a family warrior Fei Chun (was wrongly named Fei Sun earlier, also a ex roomie) and five other drivers.

Waiting for two carriages to drive by before crossing the road, he came to the side of the six men and prodded: "Where are the others?"

Fei Chun invited: "They are headed to the red light district! We are looking for a place to have a drink. Why don't Manger Shen join us?"

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Do you know which brothel they are visiting?"

One of the drivers joked: "They surely cannot afford the expensive ones. Manager Shen only has to look for the most run-down brothel and you will definitely find them there." Fei Chun and the other drivers burst out laughing.

Witnessing their lively mood and making sure that there are no suspicious characters nearby, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to spoil their night. Pulling them aside to avoid blocking the road, he then revealed: "Something has cropped up. Assistant Manager Zhang just informed me Mistress (Feng Fei) has offended a local villain of considerable influence. Although he cannot lay a finger on Mistress, he can effortlessly create trouble for us. Please go and have your drink, and return to the Villa as soon as possible."

Their faces drained of colour, Fei Chun and the drivers nodded in obedience.

Xiang Shaolong speedily continued his search for Lei Yun'er and the others. After walking for some time, all he could see were splendid buildings housing brothels or wine houses. He thought to himself that this is similar to Beijing's Wangfu Jing (王府井) in the 21st Century; unless you are a rich man, this place has nothing for you. The only places an average person can go are the small lanes and narrow streets, where the cheap thrills are situated.

His heart is swelling with regret.

At the end of the day, he lacks experience in managing people, simply because he does not believe in treating fellow humans as servants at his beck and call. His only wish is for them to be happy and free as much as the situation permits.

With the present unfavorable scenario, he should not have let them run amok.

His reservations are not without reason.

A sore and incensed Zongsun Long will use every opportunity to harass Feng Fei.

If he lands himself in trouble when they had just arrived in Lin Zi, everyone will lose confidence in this newly appointed General Manager. In addition, except for a dagger, he did not bring any weapons with him. If he gets into a fight, he will be at a serious disadvantage.

Burning with anxiety, he happened to see a crowd gathering in front of a brothel. The people are whispering to one another and pointing fingers at the brothel.

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart sinking. Stepping forward, he squeezed into the pool of people and questioned: "What happened?"

Bearing scorn in his tone, one man ridicule: "Having the guts to visit prostitutes when he hasn't paid up his debt to Master Zongsun, these people

do not know the meaning of death! Ai! Being dragged away like a pack of dogs, how shameful.”

‘Game over’ Xiang Shaolong thought. He made enquiries about the appearances and dressings of the men being mugged and after confirming their identities are those of the missing Lei Yun’er and company, he announced: “Those men are my friends and I have brought the money to redeem their debts. Does anyone know where is Master Zongsun staying?”

Unexpectedly, the faces of everyone in the crowd lost colour. Not only did they fail to give him an answer, they ran off, disappearing without a trace, leaving him stunned on the spot.

Coincidentally, a shifty and mysterious-looking man happened to sneak out of the brothel, Xiang Shaolong grabbed him, asking: “Brother...”

The man was shocked out of his wits: “Please do not tell my wife...”

Xiang Shaolong is not in the mood to laugh at the man’s blunder. He corrected: “Brother is mistaken. I am just asking for directions.”

The man took a closer look and realized Xiang Shaolong is not someone familiar to him. Putting his hand on his chest, he panted: “I was nearly frightened to death! Even if you are asking for directions, you need not pull my shirt!”

Scanning this man, Xiang Shaolong guessed he is about twenty-five or twenty six years old. Dressed in flamboyant clothes, he is rather fine looking and

must be the offspring of some Qi official. Loathing his hen-pecked behavior, Xiang Shaolong grumbled: "I am anxious to locate Master Zongsun's Residence. Little Brother (I) is his distant relative and is here to visit him."

The man sighed with relief: "Zongsun Residence is along Great Southern Way, diagonally opposite my house. Let me give you a ride! Ai! I also need to be home soon."

Xiang Shaolong is secretly delighted to meet such a friendly person and is now having a favourable impression of him. Together, they crossed the road to the opposite side.

There is a carriage parked outside a wine house and as they approached it, a driver climbed out of the carriage and sat down in the driver's seat in front.

The man proudly declared: "I intentionally parked the carriage here so that nobody will suspect I actually went to a brothel. Hey! I still do not know Brother's name."

Xiang Shaolong introduced: "I am Shen Liang. What about Brother?"

The man cheered: "I am called Xie Ziyuan. Come! Get in the carriage!"

As the carriage began to move, Xie Ziyuan comfortably lounged in his seat, praising: "Lan Lan's skin is as smooth as silk and she knows exactly what I want. What a pity I cannot stay overnight."

Xiang Shaolong has calmed down by now and is busily thinking of a plan to

rescue his men back from Zongsun Long. He casually asked: "Is your wife ugly looking?"

Like a wronged man, Xie Ziyuan protested: "Of course not! Lan Lan may be rather good-looking but my wife is way prettier than her"

Xiang Shaolong's curiosity is aroused: "Then why is Brother Xie looking for other women?"

Xie Ziyuan explained: "Please do not jump to the conclusion that I have grown sick of looking at her. Actually, the more I look at her, the more I love her, and also fear her. Whenever we start quarrelling, my Mum will side her and not me because she has given my mum two healthy grandsons."

Xiang Shaolong sympathized: "Brother Xie is fooling around because your wife has failed to treat you in a kind and loving manner."

Slapping his thigh, Xie Ziyuan exclaimed: "Brother Shen truly understands me! Ha! Can Brother Shen do me a favour?"

Xiang Shaolong was amazed: "How can I help you?"

Xie Ziyuan leaned towards his ear as if he is afraid of being eavesdropped. He whispered softly: "Can you pretend to be my long lost friend, coming to visit me from a faraway place? Thus, I will have to play a good host to you and this will allow me to spend more time outside the household. Hey! I will not treat you shabbily and will pay for all of Brother Shen's expenses."

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to be angry or amused at his proposal. He rejected: "I will be quite busy over the next two days. I am afraid I cannot visit you at your honourable residence."

Xie Ziyuan begged: "I will only take up a bit of your time. Is tomorrow good for you? I will wait for your esteemed arrival anytime after five pm."

Xiang Shaolong helplessly agreed: "I will try my best to make time!"

Xie Ziyuan was thrilled: "Brother Shen is a true friend. Ai! You would not believe it even if I told you. I, Xie Ziyuan, am an Imperial Treasurer but there is nobody who dares to accompany me to a brothel. Even when beauties surround me, there is not a single mate by my side. It is so depressing. Now, I am thankful for Brother Shen's company."

Xiang Shaolong secretly kicked himself for not recognizing someone's true status. The man is a high-ranking official of Qi and it is rare that he did not display any airs and speaks in a straightforward manner. He is starting to like this new friend of his.

He joked: "I think all your friends are frightened of your wife's scolding."

Xie Ziyuan muttered: "It is her beating."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was reeling in shock, the burly driver turned around and announced: "Young Master! We are reaching Master Zongsun's Residence."

Xie Ziyuan whispered again: “Only Xie Quan is loyal to me.”

Finishing his sentence, he faced Xie Quan and commanded: “We will send Master Shen in before going home.”

Holding Xiang Shaolong’s hand, Xie Ziyuan apologized: “Please forgive Little Brother (me) for only sending you here but unable to stay and accompany you. I have a curfew and need to return immediately. If her anger is provoked, Little Brother (I) will be in trouble!”

The carriage stopped in the front of an enormous property filled with multiple courtyards. Next, Xie Quan reported Xie Ziyuan’s name to the sentries and the main door opened in an instant, allowing them to drive straight in.

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. He could not help but asked: “Brother Xie seems to be on good terms with Master Zongsun.”

Xie Ziyuan smiled: “We have a few ongoing collaborations!”

He added: “The relationship between people are partly decided by fate. Somehow, when I first met Brother Shen, I can feel a sense of delight and instinctively feel that Brother Shen is a friend worth having. Hey! Remember to come by tomorrow night!” He pointed to the location of his residence.

In this moment, the carriage grinded to a halt, stopping in front of a flight of steps of the main building within the residence. A few muscular men accosted the carriage and their leader opened the carriage door, respectfully

introducing: “Your servant is named Bao Guang. Will Official Xie please alight.”

Xie Ziyuan started: “I am just sending Zong...”

Xiang Shaolong rapidly whispered into his ear: “I am not his relative.”

Xie Ziyuan was stunned momentarily before continuing: “I am sending my good friend Shen Liang to pay his respects to Master Zongsun. Is Master Zongsun at home?”

Bao Guang was slightly surprised: “So it is Master Shen. Master (Zongsun) is hosting an esteemed guest from Chu. Your servant (I) will notify him now. What does Master Shen want your servant (me) to report to Master (Zongsun)?”

Not wanting to reveal too much about himself to Xie Ziyuan, Xiang Shaolong turned to him and promised: “There is no need to hold back Brother Xie any longer. I will definitely see you tomorrow night.”

Concluding his sentence, he got down the carriage and watched Xie Ziyuan drove away.

As Xie Ziyuan was leaving, he continued waving back, not taking Xiang Shaolong’s lies to heart.

The main building inside Zongsun Residence is a spectacular Courtyard built entirely of white stone and is elevated above the ground. The main double

doors and walls are lavishly sculptured.

Above the double doors is a majestic signboard with three words written on it: Zongsun Residence, flaunting the wealth and status of its occupant.

The main building is flanked by a left courtyard and right courtyard. Behind the building is a huge garden, housing many more courtyards that are further than what Xiang Shaolong is able to see. Sweeping his gaze across his surroundings, he observed that the entire cluster of courtyards is surrounded by another high wall. The layout of the residence is similar to a fortress and the first door that Xiang Shaolong entered is equivalent to a fortress gate.

As the raindrops and snowflakes fly through the air, scores of eight-sided lanterns are shining brightly into the square in front of the main building, making it look as bright as day. There is a carriage parked by the side but the horse has been led away. It probably belongs to the distinguished visitor of Chu.

Looking at his collected and awe-inspiring posture, Bao Guang dare not behave in a slipshod manner. He welcomed: "Master Shen, please enter to avoid the wind and snow before speaking!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded and climbed the steps alongside Bao Guang.

Zongsun Long is truly a renowned tycoon. The building materials used to build the main building are meticulously selected, leaving a strong impression on anyone who passes by. The pillars and beams are all made up of high quality Nan wood and only complete logs are used. Cornices are carved in

suitable corners and stone sculptures are exquisitely engraved. It is an exciting sight to behold.

After sitting down, Xiang Shaolong then implored: “Brother Bao, please inform Master Zongsun that I am here regarding Feng Fei’s issue.”

With astonishment written all over his face, Bao Guang was in a fluster and hesitated for a while before entering the hall to make his report.

Xiang Shaolong coolly waited.

If Zongsun Long chose not to see him, what can he do?

Resorting to force is suicidal.

He retains some confidence that Zongsun Long will see him, for if he truly loves Feng Fei, his curiosity will certainly get the better of him and he would want to find out what Xiang Shaolong is up to.

After a short wait, Bao Guang summoned: “Master invites Brother Shen to go in.”

Xiang Shaolong was incredulous that his plan is proceeding smoothly. He did not have time to delve further and quickly stood up and followed Bao Guang in.

Bao Guang whispered: “Master (Zongsun) is willing to see Master Shen because Master Shen (you) is a friend of Official Xie.”

Xiang Shaolong knows that Bao Guang has intervened for him and hurriedly thanked him.

They passed through a garden path made up of crushed rocks before arriving at the entrance of the main hall. Four family warriors are standing guard on two sides.

Bao Guang stopped in his tracks and announced in a loud voice: “Master Shen is here!”

Witnessing the elaborate setup of the place, even Xiang Shaolong is feeling slightly uneasy. However, it is impossible to back out now. Taking a deep breath, he stepped over the door ledge. What entered his view is a well-maintained classy interior, with a touch of antique elegance. A wide and bright yarn screen served as a divider, partitioning the massive hall into a south portion and a north portion. Every piece of furniture is made of top quality redwood. Beyond the screen, Xiang Shaolong can vaguely see two men sitting face to face, with serving maids on both sides. Behind each man stood a squad of family warriors, giving him the impression that the guest is not an ordinary person.

Under the direction of Bao Guang, Xiang Shaolong crossed the divider. Staring fiercely at him is a tall man in his forties and tastefully dressed in silk. For some reason, the man is as skinny as a chimpanzee.

When Xiang Shaolong laid his eyes on the other man, he was frightened out of his wits. He nearly wanted to turn around and run for his life.

It is Li Yuan whom he hasn't seen for some time.

His biggest regret now is not putting the fruit seed below his tongue, disguising his voice from Li Yuan.

Just by looking at Li Yuan's expression, he knows that his cover is blown and his disguise is useless.

When Li Yuan looked over, his body trembled slightly and surprise is written all over his handsome features in this face-to-face encounter as the four eyes meet.

Firstly, in order to negotiate with Zongsun Long, Xiang Shaolong did not bother to conceal his strides and heroic aura. Secondly, there is no one around that he can shy behind. Thirdly, Li Yuan knows Xiang Shaolong more intimately than Tian Dan. Thus, he could recognize Xiang Shaolong in one look.

Just as Xiang Shaolong is secretly lamenting the end of his life, Li Yuan actually winked at him, giving him a ray of hope.

In terms of integrity and character, Lord Longyang should be more 'innocent' than Li Yuan. But life is always unpredictable.

There are two charming ladies standing behind Zongsun Long, massaging his skinny shoulder and back as he leaned against a cushion. This magnate who made his fortune through loan sharking looked at Xiang Shaolong through

the corner of the eye and remarked: "Please have a seat!"

An absent-minded Xiang Shaolong paid his respects and sat down opposite the two men like a common criminal. In his mind, he was thinking: Zongsun Long, with your kind of looks, it is not surprising why the beautiful swan Feng Fei is not interested in you, the ugly toad.

Zongsun Long's bones supporting his eyebrows are exceptionally high and his gaze is sharp and piercing. Despite the lack of flesh on his face, his expressions are incredibly animated. Adorned by thick and long eyebrows, Zongsun Long condescendingly mocked: "Does Chancellor Li know why did I bother to attend to this anonymous fellow without any delay and even allow him to be seated opposite me?"

Initially, Xiang Shaolong thought Zongsun Long is speaking to him but realized that he is speaking to Li Yuan. His words are immensely ill mannered and carry an insulting tone.

With a strange expression on his face, Li Yuan answered: "Master Long has always handled your affairs in an unorthodox manner. I do not have the slightest idea."

Behaving as if Xiang Shaolong is invisible, Zongsun Long continued talking to Li Yuan: "It is because this person is sent here by Xie Ziyuan, therefore, I need to be accountable to him. When Xie Ziyuan ask about this matter in the future, he cannot hold me for treating his friend shabbily."

Turning his head over and staring at Xiang Shaolong with his squinty eyes,

Zongsun Long demanded: “Report your identity and purpose, as well as your relationship to Xie Ziyuan. If I detect any lies, I guarantee you will never be able to walk out of here with your two legs.”

Xiang Shaolong had barely calmed down and exchanged a look with ‘the friend more trustworthy than Lord Longyang’ Li Yuan before turning his head up and burst out laughing.

Behind Zongsun Long, several family warriors are now glaring at Xiang Shaolong viciously with their hands on the hilt of their swords. Once Zongsun Long gives the command, they will beat the daylights out of Xiang Shaolong.

His eyes rotating wildly, Zongsun Long roared: “What is so funny?”

Xiang Shaolong stopped laughing in an instant. With his eyes shining ominously, he stared at Zongsun Long and ridiculed: “I am laughing because the earth-shattering Zongsun Long is actually a rich man using his resources to bully the weak. No wonder Miss Feng Fei chose to reject you.”

Before Zongsun Long has the chance to speak out, the two family warriors standing behind Xiang Shaolong pounced on him from the left and right. From their body movements, they probably want to drag Xiang Shaolong up from his seat and force him down on his knees.

Just when Li Yuan is grimacing at the potential onslaught, Xiang Shaolong has skillfully grabbed the two rough hands that have landed on his shoulders. Without moving his body, he deftly twisted their arms, using their momentum to slam the two family warriors in front of himself.

Behind Zongsun Long, the family warriors are protesting angrily. Drawing their swords, they advanced towards Xiang Shaolong.

When a fight looks inevitable, Li Yuan thundered: "Hold it!"

The warriors freeze in bewilderment.

The two family warriors who were thrown to the floor are now getting back on their feet. Both were holding their hands with a pained expression on their faces. Xiang Shaolong had evidently twisted both their wrists.

Zongsun Long was in a daze and bellowed: "Back down!"

The squad of family warriors returned to their original positions while the two injured men left the hall. The hall is now as quiet as before but the atmosphere is as tense as a fully drawn arrow on a bow.

Xiang Shaolong acted as if nothing had happened, coldly exchanging glances with Zongsun Long.

Zongsun Long suppressed his anger and faced Li Yuan: "Why did Chancellor Li prevent me from teaching this arrogant fellow a lesson?"

Li Yuan swept his gaze across the warriors behind him and plainly state: "If I were Master Long, I will give these servants a beating for taking matters into their own hands. Before Master Long gave the order, they have lost control of their emotions and commence an attack. This move could potentially

cause Master Long to lose your life.”

Zongsun Long was taken aback: “Cause me to lose my life?”

By now, Xiang Shaolong is certain that Li Yuan will not betray him. His spirits soaring and resuming his heroic aura, he laughed loudly: “Chancellor Li is really smart. Watch it!”

As fast as lightning, Xiang Shaolong pulled out the dagger tied to his foot and threw it towards a food laden long table in front of Zhongsun Long.

Pok!

The men were staring speechlessly and the maids cried out as the dagger embedded itself deeply into the hard redwood.

Looking at the dagger handle that is still quivering, Zongsun Long’s face is drained of colour and he was dumbstruck for some time.

The large hall is completely silent as everyone’s attention is now on the dagger.

Nobody dared to move for it is possible that Xiang Shaolong may throw a second dagger at him. Moreover, Li Yuan had earlier chastised the family warriors for taking things into their own hands and deserves punishment. This time round, none of the earlier antics were repeated.

A powerful and accurate attack like this will surely bring fear to anyone who

hears of it but what really subdued Zongsun Long is Xiang Shaolong's display of confidence and heroic air.

Xiang Shaolong plainly asked: "Can we have a good talk now?"

This is the first time ever Zongsun Long feels that his life is at stake. He took a deep breath and agreed: "Fine! Seeing that you possess such an extraordinary skill, speak your mind!"

Xiang Shaolong first turned to Li Yuan and smiled: "Chancellor Li is truly brilliant, guessing that I came prepared."

Li Yuan smiled back: "Just by observing Brother Shen's icy demeanor, I instinctively knew you must be a top assassin."

His gaze turning back to Zongsun Long's face, Xiang Shaolong officially state: "I, Shen Liang, is Miss Feng Fei's General Manager, assisting her in overseeing the operations of the Troupe. I also happen to be a very good friend of Xie Ziyuan but if Master Long wishes to harm me, you need not worry about spoiling your friendship with Xie Ziyuan. Since I, Shen Liang, dare to come to you, I have cast my life aside. It is better to die with honour than to live in infamy."

Li Yuan was agitated: "It is better to die with honour than to live in infamy. This is a very meaningful sentence."

Zongsun Long and everyone else were moved as they can clearly feel Xiang Shaolong's fearlessness, even towards death.

This is an era where talented men are highly valued. Regardless of whether one is rich or poor, as long as one exhibits talent or is educated, one will be respected wherever one goes.

Zongsun Long has never met anyone of Xiang Shaolong's caliber. Faced with Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan's continuous verbal assault, coupled with this life-threatening situation, his ferocity has greatly mellowed.

Nevertheless, he is still a notorious triad boss who is not new to perilous environments and has overcome his fair share of trials and tribulations. Zongsun Long bluntly pointed: "You have earned your right to speak but if you are here to pit yourself against me, I am afraid you have overestimated yourself."

Li Yuan interrupted: "Will Master Long allow Li Yuan (me), this neutral party, to say a few words in fairness?"

Zongsun Long would not dare to offend the highly ranked Li Yuan who easily enjoys the entire backing of Chu. He politely acquiesced: "Chancellor Li, please speak."

Attempting to ease the hostility, Li Yuan professed: "I wish to have Brother Shen's assurance that he will not release any more hidden weapons. Only then can we talk amicably."

Xiang Shaolong knows that this strategy is to give Zongsun Long an opportunity to back down. Moreover, he did not have any daggers left. He

gladly agreed: "I, Shen Liang, dare not disobey Chancellor. In addition, I have always been an admirer of Master Long and was forced by circumstances to act against my own wishes. I pray that Master Long can be magnanimous and pardon me."

Earlier on, Xiang Shaolong appears to be strong-willed and unyielding but is now using condescending words towards him. This flattery is extremely successful and Zongsun Long's expression became warmer. In a deep voice, he remarked: "What does Chancellor Li propose?"

Li Yuan harmoniously inquired: "What is Brother Shen's motive for coming here?"

Xiang Shaolong simply answered: "I am here to ask a favour from Master Long, begging him to show mercy and release my comrades, and not make things difficult for Miss Feng Fei."

Zongsun Long secretly regretted summoning Shen Liang into the main hall.

Feng Fei is highly respected by everyone all over the world. If he is openly making trouble for her, what will Li Yuan think of him?

He is used to doing whatever he pleases and initially wanted to rough up Xiang Shaolong, demonstrating his might in front of Li Yuan. He is not someone who gives up easily but if he refuses Xiang Shaolong's request, he will be digging a bigger hole for himself.

His initial plan is to break Xiang Shaolong's legs and have someone to carry

him back. Not only can he indirectly challenge Tian Dan's authority, it is also sending Feng Fei a message that he is unafraid of anyone, pressuring her to succumb to him.

Given the current scenario when the man in front of his eyes can take his life in a flash, he obviously cannot carry out this plan.

While he is contemplating, Li Yuan laughed: "I am sure this is a misunderstanding! Master Long will not bear grudges against these servants."

As Xiang Shaolong and Li Yuan supported each other verbally, causing Zongsun Long's face to lose colour, both men are secretly amused.

Being forced into a corner, Zongsun Long had no choice but to snarl at his men: "Who is responsible for kidnapping Miss Feng's subordinates? Did it really happen?"

One of his brainier followers caught the hint and responded: "There were some men creating a scene at a brothel earlier and they got into a scuffle with our guys. We seized them and were prepared to send them to the magistrate office tomorrow. We did not know they are Manager Shen's followers."

Zongsun Long pretended to be angry: "In this case, release all of them immediately and send them back to Miss Feng."

His subordinate left to execute his order.

Li Yuan stood up and bade farewell. To Xiang Shaolong, he offered: “Manager Shen is highly skilled and your bravery is unheard of. I, Li Yuan, admire men like you. Why don’t I send Brother Shen back and use this occasion to have a little chat?”

Xiang Shaolong is deeply grateful because this arrangement will prevent Zongsun Long from exacting revenge on him.

Zongsun Long’s attitude underwent a huge change and suddenly became very hospitable, personally sending both men to the door.

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize Zongsun Long is a very tall man, almost as tall as himself.

This bloodsucker looks much more daunting when standing up.

Until the carriage exited Zongsun Residence did Xiang Shaolong finally heaved a sigh of relief but his whole body is already covered with cold sweat.

Chapter 09

Hard To Distinguish Between Leader And Follower

Slapping Xiang Shaolong's fake potbelly, Li Yuan chortled: "If not for your equally shocked expression when you laid your eyes on me, as I first laid my eyes on you, I may be tricked by this fake potbelly. Your looks have indeed changed a lot."

Xiang Shaolong confessed: "Of course I would be shocked; because there is a chance that you will betray me."

Li Yuan was offended: "I, Li Yuan, will never be such a despicable fellow. If we were fairly engaged in war, I would not be the least upset if I lose or die. But how can I sabotage you when you are obviously at a disadvantage?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed, recalling Lord Longyang's betrayal. But for some reason, he is unwilling to brand this friend as a despicable cad.

Li Yuan was taken aback: "Looking at your expression, it seems you were once betrayed by an old friend."

Glancing at the wide roads of the Qi Capital outside the carriage window, Xiang Shaolong's heart is in turmoil and he did not know what to say.

In the past, his trust in Li Yuan is way lower than his trust in Lord Longyang.

But Li Yuan can maintain this camaraderie is partly because Li Yuan is from the State of Chu. He does not feel the pressure of a direct Qin invasion unlike the three States of Zhao, Han and Wei.

Li Yuan stretched out his hand, hugging Xiang Shaolong's shoulder and revealed: "I met Han Chuang this afternoon and he is still grateful to you for setting him free at the risk of your own life. He told me he had wanted to help you when you were on the run but his hands are tied and cannot defy his King. I believe he is bluffing. This fellow indulges in wine, sex, money and ego, leading a repugnant lifestyle. He could be saying one thing and yet doing another."

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's disillusioned appearance, he went on: "Shaolong is exceedingly gifted. Even when you lose the battle, you lost beautifully and evaded the extensive manhunt by the States of Zhao, Wei and Han. Presently, everyone thinks that you are back at Zhongmou. Who could possibly imagine that you have miraculously become the manager of the top beauty Feng Fei and have made your way to Lin Zi?"

Picking himself up, Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Why did you make time to come all the way here?"

Li Yuan chuckled: "You should be able to guess what is going on! Qi did not participate in the two allied attacks and even create trouble for us. As a result, the Five States are now collaborating to support Second Prince Tian Jian to become the next King of Qi, using this opportunity to topple First Prince Tian Sheng and Tian Dan's syndicate. I visited Zongsun Long precisely for this purpose."

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Based on your theory, Lu Buwei must have come here to support Tian Dan.”

His eyes flashing with extreme coldness, Li Yuan coldly snorted: “Lu Buwei still thinks he is living in his past glorious days. He must be dreaming. Everybody knows that the most influential man in Qin is you, Shaolong. Ha! Are you aware that you can soon travel wherever you want without concealing your true identity?”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “What do you mean?”

Li Yuan exhaled a breath of air: “The five states alliance has lost heavily to Shaolong’s army and are unable to continue fighting. Thus, we are forced to seek truce and every State is secretly sending messengers to sign a peace treaty with Qin, hoping not be a target of an invasion. Regarding this matter, Shaolong must lend Little Brother (me) a helping hand.”

Xiang Shaolong declared: “Even without you bringing it up, I will still do my best to help you. Seriously speaking, even if they threaten to kill me, I will never lead an invading army.”

Li Yuan praised: “Shaolong is Shaolong indeed. Otherwise, there is no way Han Chuang can be freed!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Even if the treaty is signed, there are still many people after my life.”

Li Yuan guffawed: “When the treaty is finalized, you can openly reveal your identity, telling everyone where you are. I guarantee no one will dare to touch you. Everyone knows you are Yingzheng’s most respected teacher and anyone who offends you is asking for his country to be invaded.”

Pausing for a while, he added: “During the period when nobody knows if you are dead or alive, Yingzheng blew his top and gave the order to launch a full scale invasion against Zhao. While Li Mu is busy engaging Zhongmou City, Huan Qi, Yang Duanhe, Meng Wu and Meng Tian attacked Zhao relentlessly, taking no prisoners, inflicting heavy damage and occupying a large piece of territory. With regards to this attack, Wei and Han chose not to offer any assistance. (Empress) Hanjing, Guo Kai and their conspirators are now regretting their earlier support of Po Hu, which has indirectly resulted in their predicament.”

Xiang Shaolong felt bad about causing so much trouble but there is nothing he can do.

Li Yuan suddenly cheered: “From Shaolong’s point of view, should we cause Lu Buwei to never set foot again in Xianyang? The people of Qi may protect him but we can always lay an ambush, killing him and every single one of his companions.”

Xiang Shaolong is greatly moved but recognizes the fact that Lu Buwei will surely survive. In a deep voice, he advocated: “Lu Buwei’s days are numbered. We need not bother ourselves with him. Moreover, no one will want Lu Buwei to die within his territory. We should focus our energies on toppling Tian Dan.”

When he heard Tian Dan's name, Li Yuan became boiling mad. He furiously swore: "Tian Dan once collaborated with Lord Chunshen to harm me, I will definitely make him pay for what he did to me."

Lowering his voice, he smugly divulged: "The reason King Xiang stripped Tian Sheng of his Crown Prince title is because his beloved concubine Lady Ning accused Tian Sheng of harboring malicious intentions against her. Ha! Can Shaolong guess who is Lady Ning? She is Lady Qingxiu's sister."

Xiang Shaolong finally saw the big picture and deduced it to be a scheme cooked up to discredit Tian Sheng. Li Yuan is sharing such a piece of critical information with him, exhibiting his utmost trust in him, Xiang Shaolong.

Li Yuan continued: "I don't think you have forgotten who is Lady Qingxiu right? She met you when she made a trip to Xianyang and she specially made a trip here as well. She has moved into the palace while I am staying at the villa beside yours."

Xiang Shaolong obviously will not forget this lady who has zero interest in all men, including himself. He did not foresee that all his acquaintances are unexpectedly gathered together in Lin Zi.

Li Yuan joked: "Shaolong should have tried Feng Fei by now!"

Xiang Shaolong waved him off: "Don't make wild guesses. There is nothing between the two of us. But I will require Brother Li's assistance on this matter. Besides Zongsun Long, Lu Buwei is harbouring ulterior motives

against her.”

Li Yuan is elated: “That is easy. Once we returned to Chu, we will be invulnerable.”

Xiang Shaolong seriously advised: “Brother Li must not belittle our enemies. Lu Buwei and Tian Dan are not easy to deal with. For all you know, they will come up with a scheme and allow Tian Sheng to instantly become the new King of Qi.”

His expression turning solemn, Li Yuan nodded: “Shaolong is right. I am not giving enough credit to my enemies.”

Seeing that Tingsong Villa is within reach, Xiang Shaolong recommended: “It is better to let me off the carriage here. I want to keep a low profile.”

Li Yuan unwillingly pleaded: “Can we fix another appointment where we can catch up? I would like to know how you happen to end up here and even became Feng Fei’s manager in the process.”

Xiang Shaolong mused: “Tomorrow is out of the question. I will contact you again!”

After both men decided on a communication method, Xiang Shaolong got off the carriage.

When Xiang Shaolong stepped into Tingsong Villa, the family warriors on sentry duty came to attention in a respectful manner. Their attitude towards

him is completely different from before.

Xiang Shaolong clearly knew the reason for the change. One of them reported: "Lei Yun'er and the others have just been sent here and they are only slightly bruised. Master Shen is really great to make Zongsun Long release them obediently."

Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Is Mistress (Feng Fei) back?"

Another family warrior bowed: "She has been back for half an hour. She had given instructions for you to see her immediately upon your return."

Xiang Shaolong took the chance to ask: "Did Mister Tan come back as well?"

The family warrior replied: "Mister Tan has returned to his Tingmei Villa. I think he will probably come over tomorrow."

Xiang Shaolong is aware that Xiao Yuetan is gathering intelligence. Nodding his head in acknowledgement, he head alone towards the inner courtyard in search of Feng Fei

He barely crossed over the door ledge to the inner courtyard where Feng Fei is staying when Little Ping'er came up to him. Her icy demeanor unable to conceal her delight, she welcomed: "You are finally back."

Xiang Shaolong wished he could give her a loving pat. He mumbled: "Thank you Sister Ping for your concern."

Little Ping'er purposely put on a solemn expression and lowered her head, uttering: "I am not concerned about you but Mistress is anxiously awaiting your return."

Xiang Shaolong really wanted to embrace her into his bosom and comfort her with sweet words but he is unable to love another new woman. He maintained his silence and climbed up the stairs to the upper floor as she had directed.

Feng Fei had removed all her make-up, accessories, and is dressed in simple clothes. Sitting at a corner of the small hall, her face reddened slightly when she saw him, likely due to her recalling Xiang Shaolong forcefully kissing her the night before. She was elated: "You are back! I am so worried for you! Come and have a sit!"

Xiang Shaolong subserviently sat down on the floor opposite her, joking: "I am certain Mistress has mesmerized the entire Court officials of Qi."

Feng Fei viciously shot him a look, giving him a hint of excitement. The pretty lass was curious: "What trickery did you employ, allowing the malevolent Zongsun Long to release our men?"

Xiang Shaolong casually state: "Of course by using the gift of the gab (literal translation = skillful tongue), is Mistress satisfied with my answer?"

He was just spouting nonsense but his words have an entirely different meaning in the ears of Feng Fei. Her face flushed with crimson red, she wailed: "I have yet to get even with you regarding what happened last night.

How dare you.... I..."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realized he had used an inappropriate description. He awkwardly defended: "That is not what I meant... Hey..."

Feng Fei became so shy she did not know where to hide her face. Even the roots of her ear lobes are thoroughly red. She appears to be at a loss and it was a very enticing look.

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to handle such a situation.

The lure of Feng Fei now is comparable to Ji Yanran and Qin Qing. If not for the fact that she has someone else in mind, Xiang Shaolong doubts he can hold his ground any longer.

Feng Fei recomposed herself after an extended period. She gloomily exhaled a breath of air: "I should not be with you alone in a room like this but unfortunately, our conversation cannot be heard by a third person."

Giving him another glare, she insisted: "You must behave yourself."

Xiang Shaolong secretly groaned to himself. If she carried on speaking to him in such a manner, he cannot tell how long his willpower can last.

Expelling a breath of air, he queried: "How is Tian Dan's attitude towards Mistress?"

Feng Fei is still recovering from her bashfulness and she contemplated for

some time before finding the words: “On the surface he is obviously very cordial but I can sense that he is trying to trick me into revealing my plans. How can I ever trust him like before? I certainly would not tell him the truth. Ai! Right now, Feng Fei (I) can no longer distinguish the leader-follower relationship between you and I. It is all your fault.”

Finishing, she lowered her head again.

Xiang Shaolong instantly regretted his moment of folly last night when he forcefully kissed her, causing their relationship to become ambiguous. The atmosphere is awkward but yet filled with attraction.

If she did not use his name as a cover up for her secret lover, no matter whose name she used, he will not be stimulated to perform such an unusual act.

For the time being, both parties did not know to say, resulting in a quiet impasse.

Feng Fei finally broke the silence and gently chided: “You are simply extraordinary beyond comprehension. Based on Zongsun Long’s fearlessness and recklessness in Lin Zi, why should he do you a favour? However, you chose not to tell me what had transpired. Should Feng Fei (I) have the right to suspect that you have betrayed Feng Fei (me) and have made a secret pact with him?”

Xiang Shaolong was peeved: “You are doubting me again.”

Feng Fei gave him a meaningful look and softly lowered her eyelids halfway. In a remarkably warm voice, she mentioned: “While attending the banquet earlier, I sincerely inquired from Mister Tan about your character after having spent the past few days with you. Mister Tan is an expert judge of character and his analysis is consistently accurate. It was he who advised me that Lu Buwei is completely unreliable, which is why Feng Fei (I) has a high regard for his opinions.”

Xiang Shaolong was greatly amused. He is uncertain regarding Xiao Yuetan’s fortune telling abilities but his views of Lu Buwei are unquestionable. He simply enquired: “What did he say?”

Her eyes flashing with a strange look, Feng Fei whispered: “He told me two sentences, of which I do not agree to the first one and felt really bizarre about the second one.”

Unlike before, Xiang Shaolong is no longer afraid of anyone exposing his identity. Worse come to worse, he will go over and depend on Li Yuan. This is the territory of Qi and nobody will have the guts to attack him, Xiang Shaolong, offending the two powerful States of Qin and Chu simultaneously.

Even Lu Buwei has to ‘protect’ him; otherwise Xiao Pan will put the blame on him.

After hearing this, his curiosity is significantly aroused and he asked: “May I know the details?”

Feng Fei unhappily shot him a glare: Mister Tan says you are a steadfast,

perfect gentlemen and I can place absolute trust in you.

Xiang Shaolong exclaimed: “A perfect gentleman is not allowed to kiss a beauty? If I am a gentleman, you can place all your trust in me without any reservations. Why would you feel bizarre about it?”

‘Pu ci!’ Feng Fei’s originally stern face could not help but break out into a shrill giggle. Glaring at him once, blaming him for making her laugh, she faintly wailed: “Of course a gentleman can kiss a lady’s lips but someone forcing a kiss on a lady is not a gentleman. Since you are not a gentleman, why shouldn’t I suspect there is something going on between you and Zongsun Long?”

Feasting his eyes on her curvaceous body and protruding chest, Xiang Shaolong mischievously laughed: “If I am not a gentleman, Miss Feng would have lost your virginity last night.”

Initially, Feng Fei had resumed her serenity but her face is flushed with red streaks all over again. She loudly protested: “You are getting out of hand!”

Xiang Shaolong acted as if nothing had happened. He offered: “It is precisely so that I ran out of options in life. In my opinion, every human being is equal and should enjoy the same rights. The differences between a king and his subordinates or an employer and his employees are just a matter of appointments and responsibilities! If it is not to Mistress’s liking, your servant (I) can always behave as if the kiss never happened.”

Feng Fei whined: “Can you stop bringing up this issue?”

Xiang Shaolong can thoroughly experience this complicated relationship the two of them are sharing. Opening up his palms, he reminded: “You are the one who mentioned it first. Don’t come and blame me now.”

Feng Fei could not win the debate. She sighed: “Take it that I, your superior, is afraid of you, the evil manager. Take it that I am begging you. Please quickly tell me what made Zongsun Long agree to release our men. Otherwise, Feng Fei (I) will surely be unable to sleep well tonight.”

Xiang Shaolong then related the whole encounter accordingly, only withholding the fact that Li Yuan recognised his true identity. To Feng Fei, the story clearly demonstrates Xiang Shaolong’s chivalry, bravery and eagerness to help the less fortunate.

Her eyes wide open, Feng Fei stammered: “Do you know what is Xie Ziyuan’s background?”

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered: “Of course I know. He is a high ranking official.”

Feng Fei rebuked: “It is much more than that. Not only is he at the peak of official ranks, he possess many other talents. Most of Lan Gongyuan’s Song & Dance routines are composed by him. Moreover, he is the reading partner for Second Prince Tian Jian, which is why Zongsun Long has to make allowances for him.”

With an understanding expression on his face, Xiang Shaolong finally learnt

about the relationship between Zongsun Long and Xie Ziyuan but he did not find it surprising at all.

Feng Fei glanced at him with astonishment: “Why are you behaving in such an unaffected manner? Aren’t you eyeing for wealth and an official appointment? Either Li Yuan or Xie Ziyuan can effortlessly make your dreams come true but you acted like you are not the least bit interested.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly knew he had slipped up, exposing an undeniable loophole. He dryly coughed: “At that point in time, I was focused on saving our men and did not think about my own prospects.”

Resuming her normal, icy poise and with her eyes glowing, Feng Fei pressured: “Manager Shen, do you know why I felt peculiar when Mister Tan told me I can place my absolute trust in you?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that her suspicions regarding him are like the gushing torrents of the Yellow River: There is just no turning back. He bitterly laughed: “Mistress had better keep it to yourself.”

Feng Fei maintained: “I insist on saying it. You are the most insolent man I have ever met. Let me tell you! When Mister Tan was saying those words, I can tell from his body language that he is speaking as if he has known you for ten over years. He can give such a strong testimony about you without a moment’s contemplation and without the slightest hesitation.”

Xiang Shaolong can only sighed in his heart. At the end of the day, men are not as meticulous as women. While men are reliable in settling the big stuff,

they are often unable to manage all the small details. Even the seasoned player Xiao Yuetan is of no exception.

Glaring nastily at him, Feng Fei interrogated: “Last night, Feng Fei (I) personally experienced your unforgivable kissing skills, deducing that you are not someone who is not stirred by women. However, you are not the least tempted by Ping’er, Shuzen or Xiuzhen, what is going on?”

In a state of panic, Xiang Shaolong defended: “I believe that it is due to Mistress’s lack of sexual experience, mistaking my lousy kissing method to be a supreme kissing technique.”

Overcome by shyness, Feng Fei dared not raise her head. She griped: “How dare you continue to spout nonsense.”

Xiang Shaolong raised his hands in mock surrender: “We had a gentlemen’s agreement to not bring up the kissing episode but it was you who brought it up again.”

Feng Fei’s face is so red it looked as if she is drunk. With a mixture of love and hate written on her incomparably pretty expression, she pretended to be angry: “No more messing around! Tell me when did you suddenly grow a potbelly and why do you have so much white hair?”

Xiang Shaolong gave it all he’s got. He faked a surprise tone: “I have had this potbelly for a few years. Didn’t you feel it last night? And after I found out that Mistress has a secret lover, I am gravely disappointed, causing my hair to turn white overnight.”

Feng Fei suddenly lowered her head in silence.

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to react and meekly waited in silence.

It felt like a century when Feng Fei recomposed herself once again and gently remarked: "Why didn't Feng Fei (I) meet you earlier? For the past twenty-one years of my life, just now was the first time I can feel that all my worries have disappeared."

Not knowing how to answer her, Xiang Shaolong blew out a mouthful of air.

Earlier on, he, too, had momentarily forgotten about his wives and child in Xianyang.

Feng Fei respired a breath of air too and plainly concluded: "You are a true gentleman. Otherwise, you can easily make use of my vulnerability now to obtain my body. Presently, my fate is intertwined with yours. Can you honestly tell me who are you trying to evade with your disguise?"

Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief, acknowledging that she had not guessed his true identity. He articulated: "Of course it is to prevent the people of Zhao from recognizing me. If they know that I am here, they will do whatever it takes to bring misfortune to me. Mister Tan and I know each other many years back when he came to visit Handan. Mistress should understand my grievances now."

Feng Fei nagged: "Can you stop acting like a servant in front of me? Feng Fei

has seen all kinds of men but there is no one who has as much self-control as you, being able to resist Sexual temptations. Ai! It is late! You have had a busy day, please go back and rest!"

Feeling like the king had just pardoned him from a death sentence, Xiang Shaolong hurriedly paid his respect and is about to take his leave.

Feng Fei groused: "You look like you cannot wait to get away."

The lure of Feng Fei's lovely appearance is making it difficult for Xiang Shaolong to live up to her expectation of a gentleman with excellent self-control.

Knowing that she is still stuck in a dilemma, he shifted towards her and half squatted down. He reached his hand out below her chin, slowly lifting her gorgeous head up to face himself, provoking: "Does Mistress know what are the consequences of your words?"

Feng Fei seemed to have lost all resistance and self-conscious, allowing him to make this suggestive move. Her bright eyes closing halfway, she whispered: "You won't. Right?"

Xiang Shaolong kissed her deeply, thoroughly enjoying it as she kissed passionately in return before he summoned all his willpower to break the kiss and quietly left.

When he reached the lower level, Little Ping'er is sitting at a corner with her back facing him.

He sighed with a breath, hardened his resolve and walked away.

Chapter 10

Surrounded By Women

Tingsong Villa employs a courtyard design: The front area is used for miscellaneous activities and the rear area is used for living quarters. All courtyards are symmetrical in design. Walking in from the main door, one will pass by a small square, followed by a sitting room, the main hall and a rear living room. The rooms on the left and right are used for various purposes, such as a study room, a playroom, etc.

Beyond that is a huge garden and a 'Sanjing' styled residence. The residence is a cluster of eight courtyards, clearly allocated to different people based on their status and importance. Another well-decorated garden filled with various plants and trees surrounds the residence.

Feng Fei's block is right in the centre of the eight courtyards, with a backdrop of fake mountains, fountains, ponds, bushes, trees and even potted plants. It is a view to die for.

It happened to stop snowing as Xiang Shaolong is leaving the main block. Behind the clouds, the moon is showing half its face. As the golden yellow rays shine down on the silvery white garden, it creates a soothing effect, allowing Xiang Shaolong to relax his tense sensations.

It will be heaven on earth if he is able to spend the night with Feng Fei in the upper floor of the main block.

Pondering on this thought, Xiang Shaolong had a shock as he stopped at the edge of the garden. If they proceeded with several more encounters in a similar fashion, he will eventually succumb to temptation and have a sexual relationship with Feng Fei.

Letting his eyes take in the exotic and therapeutic garden sightings, he becomes even more aware of the cloak and dagger politics and evil darkness at work.

As he was brimming with emotions, a glib and sweet voice sounded out behind him: "Why is Manager Shen standing there for such a long time?"

Xiang Shaolong turned around. Like an angel appearing in the night, this beauty gracefully sashayed to him. Just one step away before the two bodies collide, she halted her advance and raised her delicate and exquisite face, looking at him meaningfully, awaiting his reply.

He obviously could not tell her what he is truly thinking. He spluttered: "I am immersing myself in the wonderful landscaping of the garden. Whoever designed this garden must be a top horticulturist, being able to blend man-made structures and Mother Nature into one body, creating infinite possibilities in such a limited space."

In the same instant, he detected a quick flashing of candle light from Feng Fei's room on the upper floor. He deduced that there is someone who moved to the window before hiding at a side, blocking the candlelight and causing the alleged flashing of the candlelight. Needless to say, she is eavesdropping

on their conversation.

Hearing his description, Zhu Xiuzhen became intoxicated in his words. She praised: "That is an excellent description by Manager Shen. I know nature can represent certain moods and feelings. For example, a banana tree reminds me of the falling raining, a fruit tree reminds me of the autumn harvest; a wall reminds me of a row of bamboo. But never did I think of nature as thoroughly and as penetrating as Manager Shen."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "Why hasn't Miss Xiuzhen retired for the night?"

Pulling the corner of his shirt, Zhu Xiuzhen walked him to the side of a pond far away from the main block before whispering: "Sa Li came to see me today."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "Why wasn't I aware of it?"

Zhu Xiuzhen explained: "Gu Ming let him in secretly through the back door. Xiuzhen (I) and him were lovers before. I cannot harden my heart to not see him."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong can recall the venomous look in Sa Li's eyes as he was being dismissed. He questioned in a deep voice: "What did he say?"

Zhu Xiuzhen sighed: "I should not be telling you this but he sounded so serious there is no way I can hide it from you. He swore he would hack you and Zhang Quan to pieces. Judging from his tone, I am sure he has someone backing him up."

As Xiang Shaolong thought of Gu Ming, Fu Yan and the rest of the gang who used to follow Sa Li's leadership, he can feel his own fighting spirit soaring. If he does not make the first move to rid the troupe of these internal spies, in the future, a careless move could see him at a disadvantage and sustaining heavy losses.

He icily quizzed: "Did you try to find out who are his backers?"

Zhu Xiuzhen was stunned: "He is not willing to reveal his employer. Ai. Can you please give him a way out? He is a man who has lost everything."

Xiang Shaolong frankly state: "If you are dumb enough, he will still get to own you and your riches. The fact that he is working with a powerful mastermind clearly shows that he is just making use of you."

Guilt-ridden, Zhu Xiuzhen lowered her head.

Patting her shoulder, Xiang Shaolong comforted: "Please go back to bed; I will take care of this matter. In the future, do not ever meet him alone and do come to me if you have any problems."

Tugging the corner of his sleeve, Zhu Xiuzhen offered: "Will you allow me to accompany you tonight? You are now the hero of the Troupe."

Stretching out his hand, Xiang Shaolong pinched her cheek, laughing: "I am dead tired and had several frightening encounters today. All I want to do is to lie down and have a good rest. I will have to defer Miss's generous offer!"

Catching up to his departing figure, Zhu Xiuzhen charmingly suggested: “I am an expert masseuse. Shall I serve you a round of massage? I guarantee you will fall asleep before you know it.”

Xiang Shaolong is highly aroused but he remembered Feng Fei has activated his flames of passion earlier. If he allows himself to be further Sexually aggravated by Zhu Xiuzhen’s massage, the small fire can burn down an entire forest. He would lose control and violate his own commandment. Thinking about this, he reached out his hand and embrace her towards himself, giving her a light peck on her lips, gently professing: “With such a fine female specimen on my bed, how can I remain unmoved and how can I fall asleep easily?”

Zhu Xiuzhen breathed heavily: “You do not love me. That is why you do not allow me to serve you.”

Trying his best to pacify and kiss her, Xiang Shaolong finally slipped away after much difficulty. Before he reached his room, he was intercepted by Zhang Quan and was dragged into his room. Zhang Quan probed: “How did you persuade Zongsun Long to release our men? Did you promise him certain benefits?”

He certainly could not be as open with Zhang Quan as compared to Feng Fei. Pretending to break out in cold sweat, Xiang Shaolong whispered: “Fortunately, the Chancellor of Chu, Li Yuan, is at the scene. He knows I represent Mistress (Feng Fei) and put in a good word for me. Zongsun Long is afraid of offending him and agreed to release our men as a result.”

Zhang Quan frowned: “Do you think Li Yuan has designs on Mistress too? Today’s troubles are all because you did not consult me regarding human resource management. Do not make the same mistake in the future.”

While he agreed with Zhang Quan on this point, he was glad to make the mistake. Otherwise, he would not know the extent of Li Yuan’s friendship. Inspired, he enquired: “Do you know who Sa Li’s employer is?”

Zhang Quan apparently did not know about Sa Li’s secret meeting with Zhu Xiuzhen and was astounded at this comment. He implored: “What happened?”

Xiang Shaolong mumbled jumbled: “Mistress (Feng Fei) told me someone has seen Sa Li loitering around.”

After a short contemplation, Zhang Quan shook his head: “I am not very sure. Sa Li is a citizen of Zhao and he could be working for someone influential in Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong found this information to be greatly helpful. He bade his farewell and returned to his own room.

Stepping into his room, a vague fragrance entered his nostrils.

Xiang Shaolong is afraid of being poisoned by sleep-inducing incense or something related and instantly held his breath. When he was about to light his lamp, Dong Shuzen’s gentle voice can be heard from his bed: “I do not

want the lights on.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a big headache approaching. Earlier tonight, he had been sexually tempted first by Feng Fei, followed by Zhu Xiuzhen. He can feel his willpower decreasing with each new encounter. Moreover, Dong Shuzen is a high-class escort and even if he laid her, he need not feel accountable for this love debt. Momentarily, his mind is filled with the possibility of this one night stand.

Dong Shuzen naughtily cooed: “Why aren’t you coming over?”

With a bitter smile, Xiang Shaolong walked over to her. Under the faint illumination of the moonlight through the window, coupled with his familiarity of the room in darkness, he is able to vaguely see his way.

Pulling the bed curtains to one side, he saw Dong Shuzen sitting on his bed with a blanket wrapped around her body. She coquettishly smiled: “Please do not be mistaken. I am only here because I have some secrets to tell you.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought to himself: What if underneath that blanket is her naked body? He can feel a sense of disappointment.

Xiang Shaolong took off his shoes and readily dumped his overcoat on a chair. Climbing onto his bed, he sat down cross-legged facing her and examined: “What kind of secrets is it that has to be revealed on the bed?”

Dong Shuzen’s aura of exquisiteness may be inferior to Feng Fei’s but she is not too far off. Her beauty is comparable to Dan Meimei. In addition, she is at

the prime of her youth, fresh and at an ideal age. Regardless of how you look at it, she is certainly an erection-inducing beauty, a person who will make you lose your self-control. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong is filled with perverse thoughts and he would be lying to himself if he said he is not tempted at all.

Dong Shuzen released her grip and allow the cotton blanket to slip off, revealing her perfect hourglass naked upper body.

Under the hazy moonlight, her prominent and high nose became more outstanding, as did her firm and protruding breasts, evoking countless mesmerizing sensations.

The killing point is due to her fast breathing, her supple flesh are quivering minutely, causing Xiang Shaolong to lose his soul in this seducing rhythm.

As Xiang Shaolong was highly agitated, Dong Shuzen's smooth and warm body snaked into his bosom, letting him enjoy the slick, fragrant and soft female body sticking onto his own, creating intense excitement.

Although Xiang Shaolong unconsciously hugged her tightly in return, his mind remains clear and sharp. He whispered: "Can you first state your intentions?"

Dong Shuzen unwilling wriggled, causing Xiang Shaolong to become even more disconcerted. Gritting his teeth in endurance, he refocused his mind and warned: "If you are using your body to bribe me, you will earn nothing but my disdain."

It is not often that he employs such cruel words to a female but if not for this;

he will unquestionably fall into this flesh trap.

As anticipated, Dong Shuzen's body trembled and she withdrew herself from him.

Xiang Shaolong's mind is still filled with connotations of himself cuddling her tender and slim waist. He could not help but advance his lips towards her, enjoying the taste of her ruby lips.

Soon, Dong Shuzen has entangled herself around his thick and muscular neck but after they stopped kissing, she did not try to seduce him with any suggestive actions.

Seeing that he was silent, Dong Shuzen slowly asked: "You do not love Shuzen?"

Even if he did not love her, Xiang Shaolong could not bear to say it out for this is against his own conscious. He bitterly laughed: "A man who does not love you is not an ordinary man. But we are now in an unusually dangerous situation and surrounded by enemies crying for our blood. If we enter into a relationship without making sure of each other's agenda, it will only complicate matters and worsen the situation."

Dong Shuzen sat up straight. She apologized: "I did not think about this point. I only wish that after giving my body to you, I would be able to enjoy some of your love and attention in the future. You are truly exceptional, even Zongsun Long has to make allowances for you."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “Unlike the others, why didn’t you suspect Zongsun Long and I came to a secret understanding?”

Dong Shuzen sweetly chirped: “Because I know you are more than that.” Xiang Shaolong immediately felt that she is a friend whom he can confide in but is also concerned that she is just trying to sweet-talk him. He proposed: “If I am able to let Mistress (Feng Fei) retire peacefully and allow you to inherit her business, forming your own Troupe, how would you feel about that?”

Dong Shuzen’s body greatly quavered but she recovered as quickly and shook her head: “That is impossible. I have just received news that Mistress (Feng Fei) is giving us away as presents and our new owner is someone influential within the Six Eastern States. Right now, I only pray for someone to take me and my savings away from this place. It does not matter where I end up.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “You should have known this matter much earlier and did not just receive the news!”

Dong Shuzen nodded: “Your deduction is correct. But it is only today that I am able to accurately conclude that we will be presented to the influential Duke Han Chuang from the State of Han. This man has an incredible network of friends from high places and is on excellent terms with Second Prince Tian Jian. We cannot hope to defeat him nor escape his evil clutches.”

Xiang Shaolong was stupefied: “How did you conclude he is the one?”

Dong Shuzen coldly laughed: “Han Chuang paid Feng Fei a secret visit today

and you are probably the only one who is unaware of it. If not for some sort of agreement between Feng Fei and him, why would she meet this pervert privately? His repulsive acts in bed make me want to puke whenever I think about it.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong know that Han Chuang had slept with Dong Shuzhen in the past. No wonder he had such a deep impression of her. He gently coaxed: “You can put your mind at ease. I naturally have my ways of resolving this issue.”

Dong Shuzhen gingerly stared at him for some time before sighing: “This is not a small matter and I will not blindly believe your empty words. Unless there is some way you can prove to me otherwise, I can only depend on myself to find a way out.”

Concerned that she may catch a cold, Xiang Shaolong embraced her and lay down underneath the blanket with her. Biting her ear, he declared: “If you are banking your hopes on Zhang Quan, you are only befriending a man-eating tiger. This man has no integrity and his heart is evil. Regarding the details of my methods, unless you bare your soul to me, there will be things I cannot reveal to you.”

Misunderstanding his intention, Dong Shuzhen hugged him zealously and kissed: “I can do whatever your heart desires.” At the same time, she reached out her hand and began stroking his back.

Xiang Shaolong almost exhausted his willpower and halted: “That is not what I meant. I want you to tell me all the vested relationships you have with

Zhang Quan or any other individuals, as well as all related events.”

Dong Shuzen stopped teasing him and made a big frown: “But how should I know if you are a die-hard loyalist of Mistress (Feng Fei)? Frankly speaking, my wealth is secondary to hers. In terms of looks, I lose out by an even greater margin. And you are not the least interested in my body. How can I have the confidence to align your interests with mine?”

Xiang Shaolong challenged: “I thought you said you know what kind of person I am?”

Dong Shuzen bitterly laughed: “But you have always been very aloof towards me!”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely pledged: “Things have changed. In actual fact, I never had the intention to deceive you. For a long time I already knew about Zhang Quan’s relationship with you but I want you to personally confess to me about it to prove your authenticity.”

Dong Shuzen divulged: “Fine. I did spend a few nights with him before. He is a fairly resourceful man and even Mistress is afraid of him to some extent. He wanted me to make a copy of Mistress’s (Feng Fei) latest two songs and he would arrange for me to stay in Qi instead of being sent to Han.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted: “What!”

He instantaneously inferred that the song sheets would eventually fall into the hands of Tian Dan because Lan Gongyuan is working for him.

If Lan Gongyuan gets to perform before Feng Fei and uses a similar tune, it would severely disrupt Feng Fei's performance. This is a truly nefarious plan.

Rewarding him with another kiss, Dong Shuzhen proudly announced: "You never saw it coming, did you? As long as I can bring harm to Feng Fei, there is nothing I will not do. I will slip away before the performance, teaching her a painful lesson that not all the credits belong to her alone."

Xiang Shaolong got worked up: "Have you given it to Zhang Quan?"

Dong Shuzhen commented: "I would not have mentioned it if I had given it to him. There, I have confessed everything to you. Master Shen, what are you giving back in return to appease me?"

Xiang Shaolong finally grasped the devilish methods of these famous courtesans.

Their forte lies in their understanding of the psychology of men. Pretending to be helpless creatures to evoke sympathy and protection, they do not mind using their bodies and their glib tongues to negotiate for assistance. Regardless of whether it is Dong Shuzhen or Zhu Xiuzhen, they are masters of their own game.

Dong Shuzhen is currently using the tactic of indirect confrontation.

She has assumed that Xiang Shaolong is working for Feng Fei and is delivering a message to Feng Fei through him. If Feng Fei refuses to let her go, Feng Fei

will have to face undeniable defeat at the Song & Dance showdown between her and the other two famous courtesans.

Due to her unique talent, she is unafraid of Feng Fei pressuring her into submission.

Zhu Xiuzhen is positively the source of her knowledge regarding Han Chuang's involvement. And Zhu Xiuzhen probably got this piece of news from Sa Li. However, Zhu Xiuzhen chose not to tell him, Xiang Shaolong, about this critical piece of information.

Xiang Shaolong is able to come to these conclusions because he knows about the special relationship between these two ladies.

They are still working together, perfectly matching each other and doing their best to execute the plan from different angles. In the eyes of Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, they have already assumed that Zongsun Long has successfully bribed Xiang Shaolong, explaining the eventual freeing of their troupe members.

They could not be bothered with Feng Fei's destiny. Zhu Xiuzhen did not ask him about it and Dong Shuzen used it to indirectly praise him, making him feel good about himself and herself.

Even Feng Fei, who is behaving like she totally trusts him, did not reveal about her meeting with Han Chuang. The most suited phrase to describe her is: Unpredictable with hidden agenda.

With all these thoughts running through his mind, Xiang Shaolong felt that his head is about to explode. He surrendered: “Your candid admission is chilling to my bones. Ai. Second Mistress, do you know that your words make me feel like leaving here and forgetting about everything for the very first time?”

Dong Shuzen passionately served him another warm kiss and smiled: “Shuzen knows Master Shen is not someone who does not finish what he started.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly admitted to her precise judgement. Unexpectedly, he strongly grabbed her waist, nearly spraining it, and icily snorted into her refined ear: “Dong Shuzen, if you continue assuming that I am blindly helping Mistress (Feng Fei) and using these tactics against me, I guarantee that you will regret it for the rest of your life. Do you believe me?”

A frightened Dong Shuzen softly wailed and protested: “I am only pulling a fast one on Mistress. With regards to you; I am only hoping that you will pay more attention to me!”

Xiang Shaolong can feel her body rubbing all over his body like a water snake. He almost lost it and push her slightly away before gently challenging: “If I were Feng Fei and I found out that you have an extra copy of the song and lyrics, I would arrest you and Xiuzhen and conduct a search for the song sheet. The song sheet will surely be found in either of your possession. Do you dare to bet on it?”

Like a startled bird, Dong Shuzen shuddered violently, signaling to Xiang Shaolong that his words have struck her vulnerable spot, which is the secret

alliance between her and Zhu Xiuzhen.

All along, Zhu Xiuzhen is using the soft approach while Dong Shuzen is using the tough-within-soft approach. These approaches are specially formulated to attack Xiang Shaolong's weakness.

If Xiang Shaolong is lacking in willpower, he would have immersed himself in their fantasies and become one of their pawns. By then, it will be beyond redemption.

Fortunately, he had made up his mind earlier to not succumb to their 5ex traps, allowing him to maintain his present clarity.

It might be possible that the two ladies are working together with Sa Li against Feng Fei and himself.

From the standpoint of Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen, they will cooperate with whoever that they can derive the most benefits from. If Xiang Shaolong had assumed that the ladies genuinely appreciate him, then he will be the greatest fool on earth.

Both of them exchange looks with each other under the dark and dimly lighted surroundings.

After some time, Dong Shuzen sadly asked: "What makes you think in such a manner?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Why don't you go back and think about it? I will not

say anything about the song sheet to Mistress. If you want to threaten her, threaten her directly. One day, when you can place your complete trust in me and stop working together with despicable cads like Zhang Quan, Sa Li, please come and talk to me. Only then will I do my best to help you and I ask for nothing in return.”

Dong Shuzen tried to dispute further but Xiang Shaolong angrily bellowed: “Get out!”

Two rows of teardrops began to roll down the corner of Dong Shuzen’s eyes. She noiselessly left his bed.

Beyond the bed curtains, Xiang Shaolong saw her covering her milky, jade white body with her clothes and nearly wanted to call her back to his side. Ultimately, he hardened his heart and watch her take her leave.

Chapter 11

Clearing All Misunderstanding

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, it was already well into the day. In fact, it was Xiao Yuetan who extracted him from his slumber.

By now, Xiang Shaolong enjoys special privileges within the Troupe. After ordering his breakfast to be served to his room, both men sat down to talk and eat intermittently.

After Xiang Shaolong told Xiao Yuetan his story, Xiao Yuetan could not help but wipe off his own sweat, affirming: "It is a blessing that Li Yuan is a man who values your friendship. Otherwise, it will be curtains for you last night. With Li Yuan's support, the circumstances are now highly favourable. Even if you reveal your identity, the people of Qi dare not offend you and moreover, Li Yuan will not allow it to happen."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed: "Did you gain any new information?"

Xiao Yuetan divulged: "Compared to yours, my job is relatively easy. Grandmaster Zou (Yan) is still alive and is currently residing at Qixia College. The people of Qi worship him like a living deity and if you ever choose to reveal your identity, you should reveal it with his blessings. If Grandmaster Zou informs the King of Qi about the unbearable consequences of your demise, I guarantee that even if someone points a sword at his (King of Qi) throat, he would not dare to harm you."

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: “Let me first meet up with him before we decide what to do next. Can Brother Xiao make the necessary arrangements?”

Xiao Yuetan swore: “You can count on me. I will act on it by today. Lu Buwei is due to arrive this afternoon. I will send my men to put Zhang Quan under strict surveillance. The moment he gets the money will also be his unlucky moment.”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Do not inflict serious injuries on him. I still need him to indirectly gain knowledge about Lu Buwei’s plans.”

Xiao Yuetan coldly hissed: “Killing someone like him will only dirty my hands. Shaolong can put your mind at ease.”

He laughed: “Do you remember my colleague Zongsun Heji? He happened to be Zongsun Long’s nephew and I will seek his assistance in spying on Zongsun Long’s strategies. Since young, he has been disgruntled with this uncle of his. Moreover, he is a great admirer of Feng Fei and we can appeal to his sense of justice to help us out. But if Shaolong is willing to come out into the open with your original identity, I am certain that even the powerful and reckless Zongsun Long would not dare to do anything rash. Ai. Now that you are alive and can return to Qin, there is no one who will risk antagonizing you, especially the Three States of Han, Zhao and Wei. Each State wishes for the other States to make a move against you and bear the crime of killing you. What wishful thinking!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded in agreement.

Ever since he was on the run, the Three States have combined efforts to hunt and kill himself. Now that the window of opportunity is over and they are seeking peace with Xiao Pan, who, in their right mind, would want to cause trouble for him, Xiang Shaolong. The best thing about this is on the surface; the people of Qi have to put up a show of doing their best to safeguard him, in order to maintain the cordial relationship between Qi and Qin.

In the eyes of the people of Qi, their primary target is their longstanding nemesis Yan, not Qin nor Xiang Shaolong.

With the support of the influential Li Yuan, Xiang Shaolong felt that he can become himself again whenever he chooses to and not live life in constant fear of being discovered.

Xiang Shaolong can gingerly feel his natural outstanding aura revitalizing his body but is slightly reluctant to give up the present role he is playing. He laughed: "Li Yuan is representing Chu, from Han we have Han Chuang and Qin is of course Lu Buwei. Who are the other three representatives from the other three states?"

Xiao Yuetan updated: "Coming from Wei is obviously your old friend Lord Longyang. From Zhao comes Guo Kai. For Yan, Prince Dan dare not make the trip in person but sent his Chief General Xu Yizhe. This man has been promoted and awarded the title of Lord Yangle by the King of Yan."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "It is truly a congregation of old friends.

Which is the most famous brothel around here? We should reserve two tables there and hold a gathering for old time's sake!"

Xiao Yuetan is elated: "Shaolong is finally in the mood to crack jokes!"

In this instance, the sound of knocking can be heard. A maid reported: "Shi Sufang's Boss Jin is here and wishes to see Manager Shen."

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise but Xiao Yuetan assured: "He is a bit of a hero to some extent and is definitely not a scum. Shaolong, there is no harm in seeing what he wants."

After putting the fruit seed underneath his tongue, he proceeded to the front hall to meet Boss Jin.

Boss Jin may have met Xiang Shaolong in Xianyang before but he obviously failed to recognize him. In addition, Xiang Shaolong's speech is now littered with occasional odd stuttering, erasing any potential doubts.

Once the usual pleasantries have been exchanged, both men sat down according to their status as host and guest while serving maids offered hot tea. Using his 'fruit seed voice', Xiang Shaolong stuttered in phases: "I wonder what instructions does Boss Jin have for Little Brother?"

Boss Jin boisterously laughed: "Of course I am here to congratulate Brother Shen on your promotion to Manager. If that fella Zhang Quan is still manager, you will never catch me alive in this place."

Xiang Shaolong is not the least bit surprised because Zhang Quan is indeed a detestable *****. But Boss Jin is someone who is exposed to worldly affairs and by right; he would not speak badly of someone in such a straightforward manner. For him to make this comment, his real intention is to test Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed in return: "I pray that in the future, I, Shen Liang, will not be the reason for Boss Jin to ignore us."

Boss Jin leaned over slightly and whispered: "There are rumours flying all over, prophesizing that Miss Feng will retire back to her hometown after her Lin Zi tour. I wonder if the rumour is true?"

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "How do you expect me to answer you? Are you forcing me to lie to you?"

Boss Jin is greatly pleased: "I got it. I specially paid you a visit because I wanted to arrange a meeting between Sufang and Miss Feng. Sufang has always admired Miss Feng's talent."

Xiang Shaolong accepted: "Although I cannot decide for my Mistress, I do not foresee any problems with the appointment. Can Boss tell me what is a good time to meet?"

Boss Jin proposed: "Let's meet again this afternoon. It would be better if we are both around during the meeting."

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong raised a red flag, knowing that it will not be an

ordinary conversation. Otherwise, Boss Jin need not be around.

Although Boss Jin shares the same status as him, which is the post of a Troupe General Manager, in reality, their standing is worlds apart.

After all, he is the owner of the Troupe. Although Shi Sufang enjoys more prestige than him, she is legally just the leading female actress under his banner. On the other hand, he, Xiang Shaolong, is just a highly ranked runner.

Boss Jin is only being polite when he asks for Xiang Shaolong to be present as well.

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged: "I got your point. However, can Boss reveal some traces of the discussion topic? It will be easier for me talk to my Mistress."

Boss Jin nodded: "I will have to trouble you to tell Miss Feng that somebody is plotting to win the Song & Dance competition at all costs."

Recalling the Soft-Boned Beauty Lan Gongyuan, Xiang Shaolong immediately understood his point: "I got it. I will inform Mistress right away."

Boss Jin cheerfully bade farewell and took his leave.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to look for Xiao Yuetan first but he has already left his room. Zhang Quan intercepted him once again and began badgering him with questions but Xiang Shaolong dismissed him with vague answers before excusing himself and headed to Feng Fei's building.

Feng Fei and her fellow performers are busy rehearsing in the inner hall and Dong Shuzen, Zhu Xiuzhen appeared to be slightly haggard. Xiang Shaolong believed that after leaving his room, Dong Shuzen probably went to look for Zhu Xiuzhen to discuss the latest developments. It is likely that they even engaged in lesbian 5ex, explaining their present lethargy.

Noticing his arrival, Little Ping'er intentionally hid at a corner, refusing to face him.

Alternatively, Xinyue is batting her eyes at him seductively, as if she is hinting him to make love to her. The attitude of the other courtesans has improved significantly, signifying the newfound respect he has gained after last night's episode.

Feng Fei happened to be giving instructions to Yun Niang and her musicians. Noting Xiang Shaolong's presence, she gracefully sashayed to his side, questioning in a low voice: "What does Boss Jin wants with you?"

After Xiang Shaolong told her the details, he plainly asked in return: "What does Han Chuang wants with you?"

From the corner of his eye, he observed that everyone, especially Dong Shuzen, is secretly paying attention to the two of them.

Feng Fei unhappily complained: "The things that you are interfering with seems to be increasing every time I talk to you."

Annoyed, Xiang Shaolong coldly retaliated: “My ability to interfere lies in the hands of Mistress (you). If you would kindly give the order, I will pack my belongings and sleep in the streets tonight.”

Giving him an icy stare, Feng Fei scorned: “With the likes of Xie Ziyuan and Li Yuan looking after your well-being, does Master Shen need to resort to sleeping in the streets?”

Xiang Shaolong knows that in her heart, she is actually afraid that he will desert her. Softening his tone, he apologized: “It is my fault for using such strong language but it is natural for me to be upset after realizing that you are hiding things from me.”

Dazed, Feng Fei wailed: “You are behaving as if you are my husband. Why should I report everything to you?”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to feel bad for his overbearing behavior.

Logically, Feng Fei does not need to notify him about her meetings.

The problem lies with the fact that this meeting with Han Chuang has implications on the future of Dong Shuzen and the courtesans, attracting his attention.

It is basically a matter of perception.

Xiang Shaolong helplessly surrendered: “All right. In the future, I will not poke my nose into your businesses.”

After a short spell of silence, Feng Fei lamented: “Why are the two of us quarrelling the first thing in the morning?”

Xiang Shaolong replied without thinking: “It is because we care a lot about each other.”

Just as Xiang Shaolong can feel his head numbing, Feng Fei gladly commanded: “Invite the Lord in at once!”

Observing Feng Fei’s outlook, Xiang Shaolong is certain that she is on intimate terms with Lord Longyang.

Lord Longyang is probably the only ‘man’ Feng Fei need not worry about that is lusting after herself.

There is no way Xiang Shaolong can hide as Lord Longyang stepped into the inner hall under a heavy escort of family warriors.

Everybody including Feng Fei, her courtesans, musicians and serving maids half-kneel, half bow to welcome this influential person from Wei.

Only Xiang Shaolong is unwilling to kneel or bow down.

When Lord Longyang first laid his eyes on him, he trembled violently and was stunned on the spot, unable to believe his very own eyes.

Feng Fei and the rest of the crowd were flabbergasted.

Letting out a long laugh, Xiang Shaolong put his fists together and greeted: “How are you doing my Lord? I can still remember the times when I, Shen Liang, was serving Prince Wuji as a family warrior and I have had the honour of drinking and chatting with Your Lordship until the wee hours. Time really flies, evoking countless emotions. Those who are meant to depart have departed. Those who are meant to die are dead. Shen Liang has nearly forgotten about the past (when you betrayed me).”

With a flash of embarrassment across his face, Lord Longyang respectfully returned his greetings: “Even though Brother Shen is willing to let go of the past, Lordship (I) will never forget what happened. Regarding Prince Wuji’s demise, Lordship (I) is forced by circumstances to act. After the deed is done, I even contemplated suicide. Aye. I do not know what to say next.”

Making use of Prince Xinling, Wei Wuji’s episode, both men have resolved this mental burden, with one party expressing forgiveness and the other party admitting to the mistake and begging for pardon. Except for Lord Longyang’s expert swordsman cum bodyguard Jiaoxi who is familiar with Xiang Shaolong, everyone else is in a state of confusion, not knowing if they had inferred their conversation correctly or incorrectly.

Feng Fei and her Troupe members are still greatly astonished, finally realizing that Shen Liang is such a reputable and prominent person. On the other hand, Lord Longyang’s subordinates are still feeling perplexed, unable to comprehend Lord Longyang contradiction. When their master got rid of

Prince Xinling, he even threw a banquet to celebrate the event but right now, he is expressing deep regrets over the same incident.

It is amazing how things eventually work out.

Feng Fei straightened her body and merrily smiled: “Your Lordship and my manager Mister Shen are old friends. How wonderful!”

Xiang Shaolong did a quick scan of the crowd. From Feng Fei to Little Ping’er, everyone is wearing a funny expression on his or her face. He instantaneously felt awkward and wronged, conscious that everyone is suspecting that Lord Longyang shares a gay relationship with him.

The crucial point is that he has never proven to any of the ladies that he is ‘a normal man’, but has proven himself on several occasions to be ‘abnormal’, leading to such an ambiguous scenario.

The most conspicuous look of astonishment is exhibited on the face of Little Ping’er, as if she had suddenly found the answer to her problems, causing Xiang Shaolong further embarrassment.

He could never imagine himself being caught in a situation such as this.

His demeanor significantly relaxed, Lord Longyang came forward and announced to the courtesans: “Dear ladies, do not allow Lordship’s (my) presence to affect your rehearsal. Please treat me like an ordinary spectator.”

Dong Shuzen viciously shot Xiang Shaolong a glare before resuming the dance practice with the other courtesans.

Coming to Xiang Shaolong's front, Lord Longyang firstly reached out his hand to grip Xiang Shaolong's hand tightly before releasing his grasp and faced Feng Fei, assuring: "With Brother Shen assisting Miss Feng, all your problems will certainly be solved."

Xiang Shaolong was shaken, finally realizing that Lord Longyang is Feng Fei's actual protector. Han Chuang is just another pawn of hers. If he were in Feng Fei's shoes, he too, would rather place his trust in Lord Longyang than the lustful Han Chuang.

Moreover, if Feng Fei wishes to travel to Xianyang to rendezvous with her mystery lover, it would be ideal to seek protection from influential people from Wei and Han. Besides, Lord Longyang has the authority to keep an eye on Han Chuang.

Feng Fei shivered slightly, gazing at Xiang Shaolong first, followed by Lord Longyang, behaving as if she did not understand the meaning of Lord Longyang's words. She whispered: "Has Your Lordship seen Duke Han?" Xiang Shaolong recognizes that she is implicitly asking Lord Longyang if he has been updated about the latest developments: Lu Buwei's involvement. As anticipated, Lord Longyang guaranteed: "Of course I have and I am aware of Miss's concerns. With this bright strategist Brother Shen guiding you, Lu Buwei will surely be biting off more than he can chew."

Feng Fei's initial state of puzzlement turned into a state of shock and virtually

fell into a daze.

Lord Longyang realizes that he was overly excited after receiving Xiang Shaolong's pardon, and as a result, his words are 'too honest' for Feng Fei to stomach. He explained: "As an ex-opponent, I have nothing but respect for Brother Shen's talent and wisdom."

Jiaoxi, who had accompanied Lord Longyang to step forward, grabbed Xiang Shaolong's shoulder in a brotherly manner, highlighting his admiration of Xiang Shaolong's capabilities and heroic deeds.

After experiencing numerous trials and tribulations, Xiang Shaolong can feel his old emotions surging.

Once again, he visualizes the scene when the Eagle King sacrificed itself for its owner.

Noticing the extreme anguish glowing from his piercing eyes, Feng Fei thought that he is grieving for his ex-owner and her own heart is filled with an indescribable feeling.

Taking a look at the rehearsing courtesans, Lord Longyang asked of Feng Fei: "Lordship (I) wish to speak with Brother Shen privately before I come back to you." Feng Fei could not reject his request and acquiesced. Moving to a side room and dismissing all their men, his eyes welled up with hot tears as Lord Longyang pitifully cried: "I am worse than a beast. Shaolong treated me so well and yet I..."

Xiang Shaolong did his best to comfort him and after Lord Longyang recomposed himself slightly, he faced Xiang Shaolong with a pair of red and swollen eyes, recounting: "I told Han Chuang about this matter and he gave me a piece of his mind. He scolded me, saying that on the battlefield, there is no right or wrong but how can I not help you when you are obviously in trouble?"

Xiang Shaolong was mystified: "Why did you tell Han Chuang this secret? You believe he can be trusted?"

Lord Longyang was guilt-ridden: "Keeping the secret to myself is unbearable. I would rather someone scold and blame me as a way of atoning for my sin. For me, besides Shaolong, hey, besides Shaolong, he is the only person I can confide in. He cannot do without me just yet as I am assisting him with several matters."

Never in his dreams would he imagine Han Chuang to be such a loyal friend but he dared not voice it out, fearing that it would hurt Lord Longyang's feelings. He requested: "In this case, can you kindly inform him about my present status, because I will need to ask him to show mercy in releasing Dong Shuzen and the other girls from his control."

Lord Longyang seems to know about the agreement between Feng Fei and Han Chuang. He nodded in agreement: "Besides guarding yourself against Tian Dan and Lu Buwei, you must not neglect Guo Kai. This cunning bastard brought your strange weapon here to Qi, intending to present it to King Xiang as a birthday gift, scheming to drag Qi down with them. King Xiang is now in a dilemma; if he accepts the gift, he will offend Yingzheng, if he rejects the gift,

tongues will wag, saying that he is afraid of Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong gnashed his teeth, savagely swearing: “Can you find out the location of my Hundred Battle Sabre? No matter what it takes, I have got to get it back.”

Lord Longyang sighed: “Your King (Xiao Pan) has just send a special emissary, warning us, the Three States (Han Zhao Wei) that whoever lays a finger on you will suffer his wrath and revenge at all costs. All of us are frightened into ceasing all efforts in hunting you down. The people of Zhao are the worst hit, losing five cities in succession. Li Mu dared not abandon his camp at Zhongmou while we have suffered a fresh defeat. Thus, we are unable to come to Zhao’s aid even if we wanted to. As a result, Guo Kai hates us to the core and during Feng Fei’s welcoming banquet last night, he kept making snide remarks, jeering and insulting Han Chuang and I. His cr@p attitude is simply intolerable.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “What is Tian Dan’s current standing?”

Lord Longyang summarized: “He still wields considerable influence in Qi and his weakest link is the lousy bum Tian Sheng whom he is supporting to become the Crown Prince of Qi. Tian Sheng is lagging far behind Prince Tian Jian, who is well loved by the people of Qi. This Tian Jian cannot be considered a man of talent but he is adept at using schemes to gather support for himself, unlike the arrogant and self-serving Tian Sheng. Until today, the successor to the throne of Qi remains a mystery.”

Pausing, he awkwardly inquired: “How did Shaolong have the foresight to

leave my residence and ended up as Feng Fei's manager?"

Xiang Shaolong originally did not want to reveal the truth but does not want Lord Longyang to misunderstand him, thinking that he is still bearing grudges. He used a simple reason to satisfy Lord Longyang's curiosity and obviously did not mention about his trip to the Palace of Wei.

After hearing his explanation and feeling remorseful for some time, Lord Longyang quizzed: "When does Shaolong plan to declare your true identity and openly ask for the return of your precious weapon?"

Xiang Shaolong contemplated: "It may be inappropriate to reveal my true identity for the time being. Let's observe the situation further!"

Lord Longyang warned: "If revealing the truth is not a necessity, I would advise you to keep your identity a secret all the way. There is a local saying here: The Extremists of Qixia, meaning that Qixia students are generally very egoistic, doing whatever they please and looking at others with contempt. It is the same regardless whether they are scholars or warriors. Moreover, Cao Quidao will defend some of his top students against persecution. There are indeed a few of his students who have learnt the essence of his skills and go about creating chaos in Lin Zi. Presently, Shaolong has the reputation of being the top swordsman, only second to Cao Quidao. If word goes out about your presence, it will only invite endless trouble. The King of Qi cannot intervene in private duels and if you happened to be killed in a fair fight, even Yingzheng do not have the right to hold Qi to it."

Xiang Shaolong is definitely not interested in using his fighting abilities to gain

fame for himself. He nodded: "Your Lordship is right. Tian Dan, Lu Buwei and even Guo Kai will use this opportunity to incite more chaos. If I get involved with Cao Cuidao, I will be just like Lu Buwei, biting off more than I can chew. That will be disastrous."

With a 'Pu Ci' sound, Lord Longyang could not help but break out into a girly giggle. He contentedly voiced: "I can finally sleep well tonight. Ever since that fateful night, my heart is so painful it seemed to have broken into pieces."

Xiang Shaolong saw that he has indeed lost a fair bit of weight over the incident. Showing concern, he vouched: "From the beginning until the end, I have never forgotten about you, my friend."

Lord Longyang is still reluctant to take his leave and Xiang Shaolong persuaded: "It is not ideal for us to spend too much time talking in private. You should visit Feng Fei on your own while I have to attend to a few of my men who were injured by Zongsun Long."

Lord Longyang was appalled: "Zongsun Long already made a move?"

Xiang Shaolong went to the extent of repeating the entire story to him. An embarrassed Lord Longyang lamented: "Even Li Yuan is a better friend than me. I am not fit to be human."

After Xiang Shaolong coaxed him with many kind words did Lord Longyang finally left in an unwilling manner.

Chapter 12

Meeting Of The 2 Courtesans

Amazingly, Feng Fei did not look for Xiang Shaolong after the departure of Lord Longyang. It was only until lunchtime was over before Little Ping'er received her command to summon Xiang Shaolong for a talk.

As he walked behind her towards the inner hall, Little Ping'er who has been ignoring him for the past few days suddenly remarked with a friendly disposition: "So you prefer males instead of females. Little Ping'er can finally give you up."

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Xiang Shaolong knows that he should not deny it but he cannot don't deny as well. Exhaling a breath, he predicted: "Sister Ping will know the truth one day. But there is something I do not understand. Shouldn't Sister Ping be following Mistress all the way? Why does it seem like... Like... Hey!"

Covering her mouth, Little Ping'er giggled: "Are you implying that I appeared to be looking for someone to settle down with? Frankly speaking, it has never crossed my mind to marry you. I am only annoyed at your condescending behavior. Mistress has advised me that my first time is the most important, and must be given to someone who truly loves me. I naturally do not wish to leave Mistress's service but she had given me the freedom to leave if I choose to."

Suddenly, he was struck by a thought and quizzed: “What if you got yourself pregnant?”

Her face reddening slightly, Little Ping’er chided: “It is none of your business. Furthermore, all troupe members would know how to prevent fertilization. Oh, are you still interested in women? Why are you asking these embarrassing questions?”

Seeing that in the opinion of Little Ping’er, it is a forgone conclusion that he is gay so he kept quiet instead.

The side of the inner hall is still occupied by various instruments but there is nobody else except for Feng Fei. After Little Ping’er excused herself, Xiang Shaolong sat down alongside Feng Fei, inquiring: “Has Mistress met Shi Sufang before?”

Feng Fei shook her head in an uninterested way, lamenting: “(Boss) Jin Cheng is a real talent, managing the operations, courtesans and clients in an admirable fashion, gaining the respect of one and all. Unfortunately, I am unable to recruit someone as capable as him, otherwise, I need not bear with your nonsense.”

Xiang Shaolong prompted: “Mistress is still mad at me?”

Feng Fei lowered her head, chuckling: “Who dares to be angry at you? Even Lord Longyang is full of admiration and respect for you. Moreover, you would hug and kiss me whenever you are in a good mood but will turn around and give me a piece of your mind when you are in a bad mood. Luckily, Feng Fei

no longer needs to worry about you needing a companion for the night. Otherwise, it will be a source of insomnia for me.”

Deflated like a balloon, Xiang Shaolong mused: “Even you believe that I am gay.”

Feng Fei shook her head: “Nope, but this is what everyone else is thinking. Xinyue was so heartbroken she went back to her room in tears. But I am certain you are not adverse to females, because I am speaking from personal experience. I am intentionally teasing you, dying to wipe that silly smile off your face.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “You are really good to me.”

Feng Fei admitted: “I can no longer fathom what kind of person you are but since Lord Longyang guarantees your absolute reliability, singing the same tune as Mister Tan, I am willing to conclude that you are a man of your word. Feng Fei will no longer doubt you and wishes to listen to your plans.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly advised: “We must resolve our internal issues before we can confront external parties; there is no better way. If Mistress is prepared to delegate complete authority to me, I will firstly commit to getting rid of Zhang Quan, Sa Li and their conspirators. Once we reached Xianyang safely, it will be mission accomplished.”

Feng Fei was slightly upset: “You seemed to have forgotten that Lu Buwei wields considerable influence in Xianyang.”

Acting surprised, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Mistress is going for Xiang Shaolong, isn’t? What can Lu Buwei do to him?”

Feng Fei knows that she had spilled the wrong beans and shyly lied: “But he is currently engaged in war. I am afraid that Lu Buwei will hunt me down before I get to see him.”

Amused, Xiang Shaolong purposely teased her: “That is not an issue. All we need to do is to notify the Wu Family. They will surely offer Mistress protection.”

Feng Fei’s face has turned completely red: “We must never do that. Nobody knows about our special relationship. Aye. Can we talk about this later?”

Xiang Shaolong decided to let her off this time. Checking the sky, he reminded: “Shi Sufang should be here any minute. I will receive her at the main gate. Does Mistress have other instructions?”

Feng Fei questioned: “Do you have any appointments tonight?”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “I have to pay a visit to Xie Ziyuan tonight. What do you have in mind?”

Feng Fei responded: “It is nothing much. I initially wanted you to accompany me to attend a banquet hosted by the King of Qi and Tian Dan. It is a welcoming feast for Lu Buwei and I wanted you to observe him from the side. Forget it. ”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly grateful for this close shave. Ever since Lord Longyang and Li Yuan saw through his masquerade, he does not have the confidence to face Lu Buwei.

When Xiao Yuetan offered to disguise his appearance, they were not prepared for face-to-face encounters so Xiang Shaolong could not blame him.

Feng Fei meaningfully batted her eyes at him, imploring: "Can you come to my room tonight? I have several matters to consult you."

Knowing that she is finally trusting him, Xiang Shaolong cheerfully left.

Striding out of the main gate, Shi Sufang's convoy of carriages was just arriving. Xiang Shaolong hastily hunched his back and slipped the fruit seed under his tongue before advancing forward to welcome her.

As charming as ever, Shi Sufang dismounted from her carriage in an unhurried manner. Xiang Shaolong and his fellow colleagues from Feng Fei's troupe were in a daze over her worldly beauty. He bowed down to pay his respects to her, not daring to meet her at eye level.

After two maids adjusted her cape, Shi Sufang came up to Xiang Shaolong with Boss Jin by her side.

This beauty did not put on any make up and her hair is bundled to the top of her head before forming a short braid at the back. It is a somewhat casual style, unique to her and matching her aura perfectly.

Under the wind-breaking cape, she wore a coat with a singlet on top. There were shoulder pads on her two shoulders, tied prettily with ribbons. In addition, three thin belts are coiled around her waist, showing off its slenderness and causing her breasts to become more noticeable, enhancing her beauty by several notches.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but secretly praise her intelligence.

In terms of beauty, only Ji Yanran, Qin Qing or Li Yanyan is able to match Feng Fei.

But since Shi Sufang is fully utilizing her strength, which is her individuality, she only appears to be slightly inferior to Feng Fei.

On the surface, it is a friendly meeting between the two ladies but comparisons will inevitably be made.

Shi Sufang appears to be unable to see through Xiang Shaolong's disguise. When Boss Jin introduced the two of them, she only nodded her head as a show of courtesy.

Xiang Shaolong swiftly moved ahead to lead the way.

Boss Jin took two quick steps, walking shoulder to shoulder with him before querying: "I just received news, saying that Brother Shen barged into Zongsun Residence all by yourself, asking for your captured men to be released. Is it really true?"

Xiang Shaolong realized that news really travels fast in Lin Zi and answered: "It is just a lucky break!"

Boss Jin instantly had a better opinion of Xiang Shaolong, raising a thumb up and cautioned: "Now I know why Miss Feng assign Brother Shen such a heavy responsibility. However, Zongsun Long has always been a domineering man. Now that he has lost face, he will certainly get even with you one day. I noticed that Brother Shen did not even have a sword with you. I will get someone to deliver one to you later. Whenever necessary, you can use it to defend yourself. If you do not accept, you are disregarding Jin Cheng (me) as a friend."

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "I guess my only choice is to thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Shi Sufang's pleasant sounding voice advised from behind: "Zongsun Long's son Zongsun Xuanhua is one of the top four disciples of Mister Wangyou, Cao Qiudao. Mister Shen must be careful."

Boss Jin painstakingly guided: "I am not aware of Brother Shen's sword skills but this man has yet to meet his match in Lin Zi and shares equal fame with Tian Dan's number one swordsman Dan Chu. When Brother Shen face him and is not confident about winning, you can throw down your sword and admit defeat. The swordsmen of Qixia value their reputation and will never attack a declared loser. Hey. Although we are newly acquainted, I am already using such a heavy tone. Brother Shen please do not hold it against me."

Xiang Shaolong can only feel goodwill for this man. He nodded: "I have yet to

express my gratitude for your concern. Why would I hold anything against you?"

Behind him, Shi Sufang was astounded: "I did not expect Mister Shen to be so broadminded, not taking to heart when Master Jin asserted that you are inferior to Zongsun Xuanhua."

Slightly tensed, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: "Qixia is famous for their swordsmen. I am sure there are many outstanding characters besides the two of them."

Boss Jin articulated: "The sword practitioners are immeasurable but the cream of the cream are only a handful. Ma Chenjia and Min Tingzhang are two of them and they love to participate in duels. After Brother Shen's encounter last night, you may have invited more trouble for yourself."

Shi Sufang gently reasoned: "No matter how reckless they are, they would not dare cause trouble here. But if Mister Shen leaves this place, you may be open to their provocation."

Xiang Shaolong appreciated: "Many thanks for Mistress's pointers."

By now, they have arrived at the stairs of the main block where Feng Fei is residing. Feng Fei came out of the door to welcome them and both ladies exchanged a knowing look, wasting no time in scrutinizing each other, capturing every little detail.

Feng Fei sweetly smiled: “I have heard of Junior Sister Shi’s fame a long time ago. Today we finally get the chance to meet each other.”

After Shi Sufang paid her respects as a junior, she went forward and held Feng Fei’s hands, exclaiming: “Senior Sister Feng is giving me too much credit. When I first laid my eyes on Senior Sister Feng, I almost thought you are an angel from heaven!”

With a melodious and ringing titter, Feng Fei hooked arms with Shi Sufang as they stepped into the hall.

Seeing that Boss Jin is still dazzled on the spot like a wooden chicken due to his first encounter with Feng Fei’s ultimate magnificence, Xiang Shaolong gave him a slight push, bringing him to his senses and following Xiang Shaolong into the hall.

Feng Fei and Xiang Shaolong sat down on one side while Shi Sufang and Boss Jin sat on the other side as Little Ping’er served tea.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong thought of a crazy theory.

To a certain extent, Lu Buwei’s desperate attempts to obtain Feng Fei are due to a hidden competitive nature against Xiang Shaolong specifically.

Ji Yanran is Xiang Shaolong’s wife and Lu Buwei’s pursuit of Qin Qing has ended in failure. Unless he gets his hands on Feng Fei, he will be inferior to Xiang Shaolong in this aspect. To be honest, even Lu Buwei himself may not be able to perpetuate this reality.

After a round of pleasantries, Shi Sufang humbly sought: “Master Jin has his own point to make but Sufang (I) is sincerely here to learn from Senior Sister Feng, curious to find out what is Senior Sister Feng’s secret to making everyone fall head over heels over your performances.”

Feng Fei knows that she is just being modest because Shi Sufang herself is another captivating courtesan. Nonetheless, there is some truth in her words. Feng Fei warmly articulated: “Junior Sister need not put me on the high pedestal. We are simply entertainers and everything we do follow this 16-word motto: Great Song & Dance, White Teeth & Pretty Eyes, Performing according to Segment, Finding one’s Niche. Although we are just a display of Song & Dance, at the same time, we are spreading culture and aesthetic appreciation.”

Shi Sufang was overjoyed: “Sufang would like to hear about the details of the 16-word motto.”

Feng Fei’s lovely eyes turned to Xiang Shaolong and plainly invited: “Why don’t Manager Shen explain on my behalf?”

Shi Sufang and Boss Jin cannot conceal the surprise on their faces. Feng Fei is known to be proud and aloof; why would she allow a lowly manager to represent her views? Xiang Shaolong obviously knew that Feng Fei is testing him and can only groan inwardly. Currently, the fruit seed is underneath his tongue, so the minute he starts talking, the meticulous Feng Fei will start suspecting that he is afraid of Shi Sufang for certain reasons. He could only stutter: “I just bit my tongue accidentally and it is not convenient for me to

speak at length. It is better for Mistress... Hey!” Seeing that the three persons are staring at him with their eyes wide open, he had to stop talking and awkwardly opened his palms skywards.

Looking at him shrugging his shoulders and opening his palms skywards, Shi Sufang was reminded of a similar cheeky body language by someone she had met before but at that point in time, she could not relate it to Xiang Shaolong. She intriguingly remarked: “I did not know that Mister Shen is a fellow connoisseur. I will seek your guidance next time.”

Boss Jin guffawed: “Even my curiosity is stirred by Mistress (Feng Fei).”

Feng Fei nastily stared at Xiang Shaolong for a moment before explaining: “Great Song & Dance, White Teeth & Pretty Eyes refers to the combination of performing talent and a beautiful appearance. They make up the star power of the performer and by utilizing a pleasant and inviting set up, you will attract the audience’s attention and subsequently leave them bedazzled. Junior Sister need not feel inferior to me. You are a success in your own right!”

Shi Sufang shook her head: “Senior Sister Feng is being too polite. Among the Three Famous Courtesans, with regards to beauty, talent, song composition or choreography, anyone you ask will absolutely nominate Senior Sister Feng to be the best. Thus, it is widely acknowledged that you are the leading courtesan. After learning that Senior Sister Feng is planning to retire to your hometown, no matter how difficult it is; I will have to pay Senior Sister Feng a visit and respectfully seek your advice.”

Boss Jin enquired: “May I ask Mistress (Feng Fei) what is the meaning behind Performing according to Segment, Finding one’s Niche?”

Xiang Shaolong first scanned Feng Fei before moving his gaze to Shi Sufang, feasting his eyes on their beauty. He did not feel tired at all and wished that this exchange can go on for much longer.

He did not expect the difficult-to-get-along Lady of Three Perfections Shi Sufang to behave in a subservient manner in front of Feng Fei. If she is not here to learn a few tricks on the sly, she would be harbouring a hidden agenda.

Nevertheless, Feng Fei is exceptionally quick witted and it will not be easy for Shi Sufang to benefit from her sharing.

Feng Fei simply rationalized: “People on different social levels will exhibit different interests and appreciation. If we are performing in the royal palace, the main concept has to be an auspicious celebration. Before an audience of learned scholars, a less boisterous performance is preferred. It would be ideal to have a performance with deep content, invoking one’s afterthoughts. If you are performing to the mass public, you must create a lively atmosphere, emphasizing concepts of love, separation, joy and sorrow, stimulating the viewers’ emotions.”

Boss Jin slapped the table, sighing: “With these few words, Sufang will benefit to no ends.”

Shi Sufang was exhilarated: “An example of Finding one’s niche is Senior

Sister Feng who created her own brand and unique performing style. Even if someone wishes to copy, one can only copy the context but never the content.”

Recalling that Feng Fei challenged the singing norms with her novel singing method, Xiang Shaolong could not help but agree in unison.

Feng Fei was not the least flattered by their praises but plainly queried: “Now that you have heard it all, I wonder what instructions does Boss Jin and Junior Sister have for Feng Fei?”

Boss Jin replied in a serious manner: “I wonder if Mistress has heard of this playboy named Qi Yu?”

Feng Fei frowned: “Yes, I have heard of his name. He is said to be the descendent of an official. Blessed with good looks and the gift of the gab, he has deflowered numerous pitiful girls. Why did Boss Jin bring him up?”

Hearing the name Qi Yu, Xiang Shaolong recalled that this is the man whom Zhao Mu used to seduce Zhao Ya. Now that Zhao Ya has passed on, his heart was firstly struck with grief; but Feng Fei used his proverb: Gift of the Gab, and her face turned slightly red momentarily, indicating that she is thinking of him, causing his heart to be struck by longing.

The two irreconcilable feelings arise at the same time, causing him to experience an indescribable sensation.

Boss Jin continued: “This man is now an active companion of Soft Boned

Beauty Lan Gongyuan. Two nights ago, he was extremely drunk at Yiya Brothel, the biggest local brothel, and started to speak in an absurd manner. He predicted that this time round, Lan Gongyuan would be able to outshine Mistress's brilliance, causing Mistress to retire with regrets and hatred. It is a bizarre statement indeed."

This is a good example to highlight Feng Fei's refinement. Despite the threat, her face remains calm and peaceful, only revealing simple signs of deep contemplation.

Shi Sufang softly surmised: "We could not help but feel worried for Senior Sister Feng. He only mentioned Senior Sister Feng's name and not Sufang's (my) name, indicating the possibility of a scheme and the high likelihood of success, inciting our bewilderment."

Hearing these words, Xiang Shaolong was greatly alarmed, deducing that this matter must be linked to the leaking of the song sheet. But logically, the song sheet is still in the possession of Dong Shuzen; why is Qi Yu acting so confident? The more he thought about it, the more he felt that something is not right. Not in the mood to carry on the conversation, he stood up.

The other three individuals looked at him questioningly.

Xiang Shaolong excused himself and left alone in search of Dong Shuzen. The gorgeous beauty was resting in her room when Xiang Shaolong barged right in, dismissed her maids and immediately interrogated: "Where is the song sheet which you secretly copied?"

Dong Shuzen was irritated: “Are you going to force a confession out of me?”

Suppressing his anger, Xiang Shaolong sat down and illustrated: “Qi Yu openly declared that he has a way to make Mistress (Feng Fei) retire with regrets and hatred. If he did not have the song sheet, why would he make such a wild prophecy?”

Dong Shuzen’s face lost some colour but she firmly shook her head: “The song sheet is still here. Aye. I just got it back from Xiuzhen and was prepared to have you burn it!”

Xiang Shaolong demanded: “Then give it to me now!”

Dong Shuzen furiously glared at him for some time before moving to a chest in the corner, retrieving a bamboo tube and throwing it to him in an angry manner.

Xiang Shaolong easily caught the tube and pried the cover off, obtaining a roll of parchment.

Opening the parchment, his face lost all colour. In a horrified tone, he questioned: “Why is it blank?”

This time round, it is Dong Shuzen’s face that underwent a drastic change. Petrified and coming to his side, she fearfully shrieked: “Heavens! Who made a switch?”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart sinking in. Unless Feng Fei can create a new

song within the next ten days before the performance, she will have to resort to singing her old songs. It will be a great letdown as the new song is specially composed to commemorate the birthday of the King of Qi. Her face deathly grey in colour, Dong Shuzen stammered in a trembling voice: "This is impossible. Xiuzhen and I have been extremely careful."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "The only solution now is to be honest with Mistress (Feng Fei) and pray for some form of salvation."

Leaping into his arms, Dong Shuzen was shaking uncontrollably: "Shen Liang, please save me!"

Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen are kneeling in front of Feng Fei, completely crestfallen like inmates on a death row. Until now, they could not comprehend who made the switch and stole the copy of the song sheet.

There is no sign of blood on Feng Fei's delicate face now that her painstaking creation has landed in the hands of Lan Gongyuan. Needless to say, it was a devastating blow to her and she was not in the mood to punish the two ladies.

Xiang Shaolong was depressed too. He suggested: "If Mistress can be the first to perform, it does not matter even if Lan Gongyuan has the song sheet."

Feng Fei shook her head: "It has been agreed that we will be performing the finale item. Moreover, Tian Dan is the organizer and they are out to make things difficult for us. They will not permit the change in order of the performances."

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Is Mistress able to come up with a new song?”

Feng Fei bitterly laughed: “Unless I can come up with a song within a day, we would not even have the time to rehearse for the song, leading to a lackluster presentation. Aye, it is hard to guard against internal spies but I guess Feng Fei (I) is partly to be blamed too.”

Hearing her words, Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen cried inconsolably and collapsed on the floor.

Xiang Shaolong could not help but feel respect for Feng Fei. Although this beauty has been selfish to some extent, she possesses the magnitude to reflect on her own behavior given the present circumstances. It demonstrates her broadmindedness and empathetic personality.

Feng Fei looked over to Xiang Shaolong with her eyes filled with disappointment. In an amazingly harmonious tone, she lamented: “I would rather refrain from performing than to put up a substandard show. I have committed to using a new song for the birthday celebration and it is inappropriate to recycle an old tune with new lyrics. Looks like I have to fake an illness to excuse myself from this competition.”

Out of a sudden, Xiang Shaolong’s muscular body shook vigorously as his eyes glowed with newfound energy. He proposed in a solemn voice: “I once composed a song and if I try to hum the tune, would it stimulate Mistress’s thinking cap, allowing you to alter it into a new song?”

In actual fact, he is hardly a songwriter but he did frequent Karaoke Lounges back in the 21st Century and there are ten odd songs that he is familiar with. Faced with a desperate situation like this, he wishes to contribute as much as possible.

The tunes of these songs are totally different from ancient tunes but under Feng Fei, this ancient musical talent, it may be convertible to suit the music of this era.

Feng Fei consented: “Let’s hear you sing it.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “I cannot sing. I can only hum.”

Feng Fei appears to pay little regards to his composition and snapped: “Then let’s hear you hum. Aye, you said you have hurt your tongue and yet you are speaking in such a flawless manner now.”

Xiang Shaolong is not interested to rebut her and picked the most popular song back in the 21st Century: ‘I cannot leave him’ and began humming.

His humming skill is deplorable but his rhythm and accuracy of the beats is rather precise.

When he first began humming, Feng Fei thought nothing of it but after Xiang Shaolong awkwardly hummed halfway through the song, her emotions went from keen interest to shock and awe. Even Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen have stopped crying, staring at him with disbelief.

After humming the entire song, Xiang Shaolong pathetically asked Feng Fei as his face turned red: “How is it?”

Dazed like a wooden chicken, Feng Fei stared at him for quite a while before exhaling a breath: “You never fail to surprise me. This is the first time I ever heard such a strange tone. It is pleasing to the ears but the tone is sorrowful and unsuitable for a festive atmosphere.”

Xiang Shaolong panicked: “I have another song.”

Feng Fei was astounded: “I thought you only composed one song?”

Xiang Shaolong had to confess: “I was uttering rubbish. To be honest, I have composed several songs.”

Touched, Feng Fei nodded as if she suddenly recalled something. Turning to the two ladies, she hissed: “Get out of my sight.”

The two ladies hurriedly took their leave. As they were leaving, the look on their faces for Xiang Shaolong is enough to mesmerize any man for years to come.

Xiang Shaolong chose a fast and upbeat ‘Navy Anthem’ and began humming.

Feng Fei stood up after the second song has ended and threw herself into his arms, embracing him tightly in a bear hug, swearing: “Even if you want Feng Fei’s (my) body, Feng Fei will gladly give it to you. I only ask that you hum all the songs that you have composed. This time round, I will make that thieving

Lan Gongyuan suffer a crushing defeat.”

By the time Xiang Shaolong left Feng Fei’s block, he felt like he just woke up from a dream.

He obviously would not take advantage of the situation and make love to Feng Fei. However, he is certain that based on his ten odd songs, he has won her heart.

It is not as if Feng Fei has fallen in love with him but rather Feng Fei is viewing him in the same way he views Li Mu: Nothing but admiration.

Xiang Shaolong may be feeling guilty but his endeavor to assist Feng Fei to defeat Lan Gongyuan is more important than anything else.

He barely left the garden of the main block when he was intercepted by Dong Shuzen and Zhu Xiuzhen.

Xiang Shaolong had to fulfill his appointment with Xie Ziyuan and comforted them as much as he can with kind words. At the same time, he reminded them not to disturb Feng Fei who is working hard at composing a new song. He instructed: “The two of you should think about who is the third party who knows about the hiding place of the song sheet. We must find out who is the culprit.”

Zhu Xiuzhen replied: “Only Zhang Quan knows about it besides us but it is impossible for him to enter my room without my knowledge.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “He can easily overcome this obstacle by bribing your serving maids.”

As Zhu Xiuzhen was feeling guilt-ridden, Xiang Shaolong took this opportunity to take his leave. Arriving at the main hall, the sword as promised by Boss Jin happened to be delivered at the same time. Pulling out the sword for a look, he can tell that it is a high quality weapon although it is inferior to Bloodwave. The sword felt heavy, which matches his needs and he can feel an increase in goodwill towards Boss Jin as a result.

Xiao Yuetan is right. Boss Jin is a hero in his own ways.

After making arrangements for Feng Fei’s dinner appointment to be cancelled, Xiang Shaolong piled on additional clothes and a cap before he left Tingsong Villa.

As the rain and snow fell around him, he noticed that the roads were largely deserted.

Recalling his earlier encounters, he was amused that everyone had the notion that he was unfathomable. His infinite pool of ideas, methods and resources is due to 2000 years of human advancement, paving a way out for him in countless situations.

If he wanted to make love to Feng Fei tonight, she will surely succumb despite some initial resistance but this is something beyond his integrity.

Having some fun with her is one thing but if he goes overboard, he would be

a third party breaking up her relationship, which is something he wants to avoid at all costs. Right now, he is on close terms with several beauties and yet maintains a non Sexual relationship is surprisingly another source of delight.

When he initially lost the battle and was on the run, he would never imagine himself leading his current lifestyle.

When Feng Fei holds her rehearsals again, it would be necessary to keep it confidential, preventing her valuable intellectual property rights from being pirated. Although he was a pirate too for violating the copyrights of other songwriters, there is no conflict of interest.

Because in the 21st Century, all records of ancient music have been lost.

Thinking on a deeper level, even if Lan Gongyuan gets hold of the new song, she would not have sufficient time to practice. Moreover, Feng Fei can insert other lyrics into the new song and there is nothing Lan Gongyuan can do.

As he thought up till this point, hoof beats sounded behind him.

He did not think too much about it until the hoof beats stopped about ten steps behind him. He instantly increased his sense of alertness.

Next, the quivering sound of a spear can be heard.

His hand grasping the handle of the new sword Boss Jin presented to him, he calmed himself down.

His attacker is a single man on a single horse. By observing the rhythm of the hoof beats, he can tell that his opponent is a seasoned fighter.

The corners of his mouth curving up to form a grin; Xiang Shaolong did not bother to look back. He slowed down his pace and leisurely walk amidst the rain and snow.

As forewarned by Boss Jin, his challenger has finally appeared.

End of Book 22